

What They Don't Know Will Kill Us

A TASTE OF RED

A
MAGICK AND MALICE
Novel

STEPHANIE LEE

A TASTE OF RED

MAGICK AND MALICE

BOOK ONE

STEPHANIE LEE



Copyright © 2024 by Stephanie Lee

Cover Design by Maria Spada

Map Design by Eternal Geekery

ISBN: 979-8-9910535-0-1

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ALSO BY STEPHANIE LEE

Dark Romance Series

“I Dared to Dream”

“Stalked”

“Monster”

“Chameleon”

“Dreaming Again”

Short Stories and Novellas

“Doctor D*ckhead”

“No Saint”

“Zephyr”

Kink Club Series

“The Den”

“The Edge”

“The One”

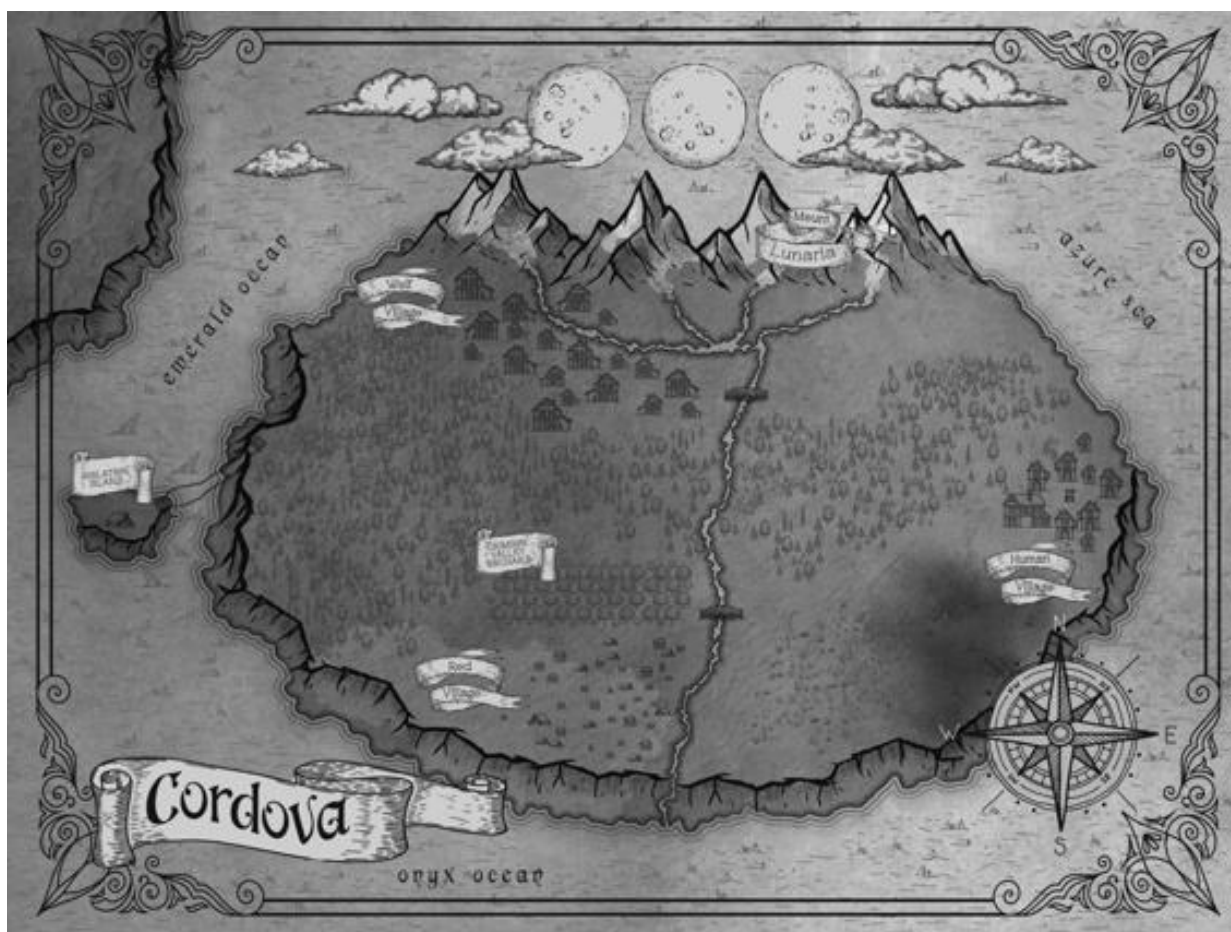
DEDICATION

For those of us who read Little Red Riding Hood and fantasized about being stalked in the woods by a Wolf—but make it a She-Wolf.

And for Sammie, a light in the reader community with excellent taste in books. I hope you like your Wolves sexy and fierce!

TRIGGER WARNINGS

While inspired by Little Red Riding Hood, this is no fairytale. This book is set in a fantasy world intended for adult audiences. It contains graphic sex between consenting adults, blood, murder, gratuitous violence with injuries described in detail, consumption of flesh and body parts, and genocide.



CONTENTS

1. [Rose](#)
2. [Samira](#)
3. [Rose](#)
4. [Samira](#)
5. [Rose](#)
6. [Samira](#)
7. [Rose](#)
8. [Samira](#)
9. [Rose](#)
10. [Samira](#)
11. [Rose](#)
12. [Samira](#)
13. [Rose](#)
14. [Samira](#)
15. [Samira](#)
16. [Rose](#)
17. [Samira](#)
18. [Rose](#)
19. [Samira](#)
20. [Rose](#)
21. [Samira](#)
22. [Rose](#)
23. [Samira](#)
24. [Rose](#)
25. [Samira](#)
26. [Rose](#)
27. [Rose](#)
28. [Samira](#)
29. [Rose](#)
30. [Rose](#)
31. [Samira](#)
32. [Rose](#)
33. [Samira](#)
34. [Rose](#)
35. [Rose](#)
36. [Samira](#)
37. [Rose](#)
38. [Samira](#)
39. [Samira](#)
40. [Rose](#)

41. [Samira](#)

42. [Samira](#)

43. [Rose](#)

44. [Samira](#)

45. [Rose](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER I

ROSE

Don't look back. Don't let them know you know they're following you.
Don't be scared. Focus on the task.

Grandma's words of wisdom play over and over in my mind as I feel one of them getting closer. A bead of sweat runs down my spine beneath one of two well-worn and hole-ridden dresses I own. The heavy, red fabric of the cape I'm forced to wear outside of the safety of my village allows no room for air to move through the fabric. It's stifling, and I already feel dehydrated and on the verge of utter exhaustion. The scent and hidden footsteps of the Wolf stalking me do little to alleviate my condition and throw me into a deeply engrained but controlled panic.

The forests on Cordova provide no solace to our people anymore. Generations ago, we lived amongst the trees and plants. We were people of nature. People with deep rooted powers and gifts that we used to heal and help anyone who needed it.

And now...now we are nothing more than the hunted. They corral us into villages and guard us. They watch our every move and weed out those of us who are different. So many have been lost under suspicion of powers. So fucking many. Once a booming village teeming with life and possibilities, full of laughter and happiness, life and dreams—now we are nothing more than a dozen or so families of paupers.

We're broken. They broke us.

Feet heavy and eyelids drooping, I walk on with the motions of muscle memory. I'm tired. More tired than I've been in a long time. These weekly deliveries to grandma's island are usually a chance to breathe and get lost in my own world. It's a chance to pretend I'm a different person, in a different time, living a life without restrictions. But something always yanks me out of those fantasies and back into reality. And today it's the damn Wolf who's stalking me.

Up ahead, a familiar boulder marks the way in my journey to grandma's.

Almost there.

My basket laden with herbs and tinctures, breads and meat, is all I can do to help her now that she's apart from our people and the rest of the world.

Once a figurehead in our community, now she's nothing more than a hermit. When the disease hit, she became an untouchable. Skin lesions were the first sign but she dismissed them as bug bites. Then, one day, she was gone and a note was left in her place.

I'm sorry, my loves. I thought it was bug bites, but I fear it's much more than that. To protect you all, I have journeyed to the isolation hut across the rocky, violent bit of sea to the west. Send someone in a week with food and herbs. A note will await them in the pulley basket with my findings. Until then, tell no one. I love you all.

Grandma

My father did as instructed, only to be met with confirmation. It was the shedding disease. Bound for a slow death, grandma's skin would slough off her body, parts falling off here and there, starting with her fingers, toes, or nose. Highly contagious, we can't even be with her in the final days, whenever the Gods decide that will be.

When that loss occurred, it was felt deep within the marrow of our entire community. Being interconnected has its benefits, but downfalls are most definitely the dominant trait for the past few decades. Pain can be felt amongst all of us, no matter the distance. When one is lost, it brings us all to our knees. Even though grandma is still with us, there is an emptiness that is still felt.

Now, years later she still lives in self-isolation with me being the only contact she's had with the outside world. Sun warm and beating down on me, birds chirping in the trees, it's mid warming season and I'm tasked with taking the basket to grandma in the hopes that we can heal her somehow or extend her life. She's the last of us to have magick within her body, a deadly secret my family will take to the grave. The rest of us make tinctures or potions and hope they work to no avail, but grandma...no, she is something of the old blood. She's special, and I'll die before I reveal her to anyone.

Red cape pulled over my head to signify I'm part of the peace treaty agreement, I walk through the forest, taking my time to appreciate the little things I never get to see while stuck in the village. Mushrooms grow on the base of gigantic redwood trees. Birds chirp happily on branches. Moss grows along the floor. The smell of damp ground. The scamper of small creatures. A ray of sun cuts through the thick canopy and highlights a grouping of flowers.

Unable to contain my joy, I sing one of my favorite songs to myself as I spin around and take in the beauty outside of my village. The Gods created this for a reason, and today is one of those days that I refuse to believe it wasn't meant for me and my people to live amongst it. Elation and freedom take over, and I quickly forget that I live in a world where my people are cursed and have been mostly eradicated.

The forest is like something out of a forbidden book I'd read a long time ago. A book hidden away from the burnings. I never imagined I'd be able to see all of this in my lifetime. Living in fear of certain death, of execution, does something to your ability to plan for the future. It halts any possibilities a "normal" person might have and sends you into a routine of just trying to live through the day.

Completely unremarkable, I'm the most dull young person in my village. Brown hair that lacks any sort of shine, green eyes, freckles smattering my nose and cheeks, thin and frail, I'm completely unassuming. Mostly mute and reclusive to anyone outside of my family, I'm no threat. Hell, they probably still think I'm a child. I've played my role and played it well. My small frame and large eyes help hide the truth of my existence. Only my family knows. Only my family sees what's under the brown wig I use to cover the secret that will kill me.

Not long after grandma's isolation, my father was injured in a plowing accident. Bedridden for weeks, he called me to his bedside one night and asked me to start delivering her baskets. Shocked my parents would let me out of their sight, shocked I would be allowed to leave the village and go through Wolf territory to the outcropping by the violent and deadly span of ocean, I questioned his reasoning.

Why me?

"But don't you see, my sweet Rose, it's a brilliant plan. Most of them think you're mute and see you as a non-threatening child. They'll leave you alone. I wouldn't ask if your grandma didn't need the supplies to survive. And I trust you, more than anyone else, to maintain our secrets and play your role in this fucking mess." Deep blue eyes pleaded with me to understand why he was willing to risk me, to risk all of us by placing his faith in the daughter that should have never been.

Assessing his face, his posture, and then finally the chair that was a poor substitution for his newly immobile legs, I gave in.

"I understand, papa. I'll take it from here."

"That's my sweet girl." He beamed with pride but the fear still edged the corners of his eyes. They would kill me if they caught me hiding my hair.

They would kill my entire family. The village would be interrogated and anyone found hiding our secret would join us in our shallow grave.

I will not let anyone down. I am strong. I am brave. I am Rose Riverbourne of the Reds.

And now, here I am surrounded by trees and feeling one of them getting closer and closer. Repeating my mantra from the past, I continue to walk through the woods, hoping my red cape protects me. At times I swear I can smell the scent of their fur.

Why are they so close? I am no one. I'm not powerful. Not important to anyone other than my family. Just an unfortunate person born with red hair in a time when that alone will get me executed simply for being part of a community the rest of the continent hates.

Just Rose. A powerless no one. That's it.

The snap of a branch on the forest floor close behind me draws my attention.

Wolf!

Heart hammering in my chest, I pick up my pace. It's close. Much too close for someone wrapped in the protection of treaty colors.

They can't hurt you. You're wearing the cape. They can't hurt you. Play your part.

And I do just that. I focus on a flower off the side of the path and play the part of the child they all think I am. Smiling widely, I smell the flower and then eat it exactly like my little brother, Bear, would do.

Gods, if you're listening, please don't let this one be poisonous.

When they killed off our magick, they took our knowledge too. Either burned or executed out of existence, most of the Reds don't know anything of nature beyond our village. Plants and herbs and healing properties are limited to what we grew. The forest is *their* territory, except under certain situations approved by *them*. And me taking goods to my grandma is one of the exceptions to *their* laws.

So, no. Whoever is following me can't hurt me, not unless they want to be punished by their own laws. I'm safe, but history being history makes it hard for me to have any faith in anything the Wolves have a hand in.

I wave at the flowers and giggle, my voice reaching an octave that is both shrill and overly sweet, and then I turn and skip off down the path with my basket in hand. It's hard pretending to be a child in an adult's body, but it's what I must do to keep them at a distance and hold tight to my deadly secret.

Tension leaves my body a bit as I feel the Wolf get farther away, but it's still following. Still there watching. Always fecking watching.

But I have a job, and grandma will get her supplies today.

Salty air hits my face and pushes the hood of my cape off my head. Checking my wig placement, I continue down the path until I reach the edge of the cliff and overlook the sea. Hurriedly, I move the basket along the pulley system across the angry ocean and rocks to grandma's isolation hut.

Her tiny island is just big enough for the hut and a small garden and outhouse but nothing more. It's up to my family to deliver her meat, herbs, and goods that she can't grow herself. Like clockwork, I'm here every week shuttling a basket across to her. And as expected, she returns the empty basket with a note and a list for the following week.

The notes are my secret. One that I hold in my heart and will die before I reveal to anyone, and that includes the rest of my family. When she left, I was young but it did something to me. It made me afraid. With her she took the power, the only remaining power of our people. Pulling the basket closer, I'm within arms reach of it when I hear a noise behind me that draws my attention.

Over the crash of the waves against the rocks below, a low growl emits from the cliff at my back. Looking up, I lock eyes with it. Golden eyes in a mass of black fur, angry eyes that dare me to make a wrong move peer down at me. Quickly, I turn my head back to the task at hand and resume pulling the basket the last foot to me as if I never saw my stalker.

I am protected in my red cape. I'm doing nothing wrong. The treaty will protect me.

My internal monologue does nothing to subside my fear. Wolves don't come close to us in their animal form unless we've done something wrong. All of the years I've been delivering goods to grandma, there's never once been a Wolf to get this close to me. Even with the treaty in place and the knowledge that my ruse as an innocent is fully believed as fact, my hands tremble as I grab the two sheets of paper and shove them into the bosom of my shift. Hand over hand, I race to return the empty basket to grandma. The need to flee is almost overpowering as my arms burn with exertion.

The ocean spins the wind around me in angry torrents, whipping my cape and wig angrily, pulling at the pins holding my secret in place to my head.

Almost there. Hurry up, Rose! Feck! Hurry! I scream at myself internally, Wolf scent invading my nostrils like it's right behind me, like it's all around me. *Feck, feck, feck! What did I do?*

Sweat running down my face, arms screaming for relief, the basket finally reaches its destination and clanks to a stop. I don't hesitate. Turning, I run up the hill to the top of the cliff, my only escape, the place where the Wolf was watching me, and keep running into the nearby forest. Unused muscles in my legs scream for relief but my brain overpowers them with adrenaline at the thought of the Wolf chasing me.

I don't hear it, but my terrified mind won't let me believe it's still not there, gaining on me, getting closer with every step I take.

And then...I'm fecked.

An angry growl close behind me draws my attention away from the root sticking up in the path ahead of me. Toe catching, I fall face first into the dirt. Rocks, sticks, and prickly barbs dig into my exposed hands, arms, and face. I feel it shift, but before I'm able to readjust paws appear on the sides of my face.

My breathing feels like it completely ceases with the Wolf standing over me, convinced I'm about to meet the Gods for whatever crime it thinks I've committed. Chuffling breaths search over the back of my body,

nudging the cape, inspecting me everywhere. A damp nose pushes my hood aside and inhales deeply against the side of my face where blood runs down from a cut and drips onto the ground.

Chuff

An exhale like it's unimpressed.

The Wolf nudges my face with its nose, silently telling me to turn so it can see me better. Closing my eyes tightly, I turn my head and pray to whatever Gods are willing to listen to let me live another day.

It sniffs and pushes at my hair. No, not my hair. My wig. My wig that's become loosened. There's no time to even wonder if it's seen me, the real me, before a low deep growl starts from deep within the chest of the massive beast holding me at its mercy.

It knows. Feck, it knows and I'm about to die. Tears leak from my eyes.

"Please! Please don't kill me," I whisper, my voice cracking with desperation. "I'm no one. No powers. Nothing. I'm no one. Please don't kill me."

The growling stops, like the Wolf is contemplating its next move. And then everything becomes silent. So silent that I dare crack open an eye to see if it's left, but that's a mistake.

A single golden eye meets mine, mere inches from my face. Narrowed in anger but gleaming with something I can't place, the Wolf growls once and huffs almost like it's...what? Annoyed with me?

Then it does something I never expected from one of them. With gentle fangs, the Wolf grabs the hood of my cape between its teeth and pulls it back down over my hair. With one last growl that sounds more like a grunt, it turns and walks off into the forest.

I lay there on the damp, dirt floor relieved I haven't been exposed but still waiting for a long time. For what? I don't know. Maybe for the Wolf to change its mind and turn around and sink its teeth into my neck. Maybe for death.

Reaching up, I find my wig and my breath catches. It's shifted back an inch and my red hair is visible. I can feel it. My red hair is exposed. And now, a Wolf knows.

Soft paws pad on the damp forest floor and come to stand next to me. A nose nuzzles under my arm, urging me to get up, but I'm frozen in shock.

A growl builds from the chest of the She-Wolf, but I'm too scared to move. Louder and more insistent, she growls again, trying to convey something to me. Still, I don't move.

Seeming frustrated, she growls and barks then stomps both paws by my head. That gets my attention, and I roll into a crouch to face her. If she's going to kill me, I'd rather see it coming. I'm staring her down in a challenge, one I hope she won't take.

Tentatively, I reach a shaky hand up, pulling my wig back in place, and securing it with a few pins. Wig secured, I stand and both of us take a few steps back from each other. A twig snaps in the forest close to our silent standoff, and her attention is drawn away from me. I take that as my chance.

Covering my head with my cape, I turn and run as fast as my legs can take me. All the while I'm praying to the Gods she doesn't change her mind and sink her teeth into me before I cross into the orchard, the unspoken barrier of protection between the forest and our village. I never thought I would be comforted by the smell of pig shit, but I run towards the relief and safety of the apples, our pigs, and my home.

CHAPTER 2

SAMIRA

What the fuck do I do? Shit! Shit! Shit! What do I do?

I run through the trees, my legs pushing harder than ever before to escape the deadly truth I've discovered. I thought I was just on a bullshit assignment to follow the Red's innocent child on deliveries to her grandmother.

But I was wrong...we all were...they fooled us all.

Not only is she not mute at all but she's not a child. I was fascinated at first when I realized she was playing a role. I've been watching her for months. Week after week she delivers a basket to her grandmother, and week after week she has seemed like nothing more than a child who has some unique differentness than the other Reds. It's not totally uncommon in our own pack, so I didn't think anything of her. Just another innocent. Someone to protect, and at times I felt like my watching was doing just that. Protecting her.

But then—then I heard her singing to herself in the forest. I don't even think she realized she was doing it, but the melody that came out of her... the rhapsodic melody that sang to my animal heart...Gods, it did something to me. It called to me in a way no sound ever has, no being ever

has. Like golden rays streamed down from the heavens and directly into my heart, I was enraptured by her from the first few notes.

That's when I knew she wasn't a child at all. Watching her in her element, free and without worry, her barriers and fake role gone, it was the most mesmerizing thing I'd ever seen. That's when I made the decision to follow her closer, pay more attention, learn more about her.

About this mysterious Red who could be a silent killer hiding in plain sight.

Rose Riverbourne. Such a beautiful name for such a boring looking Red. The dull, brown hair does nothing for her. She blends in with the rest of them, with the rest of the powerless.

But still...there's something there within her calling to me. That voice. I can't get it out of my head. Watching her rush to finish her delivery, something tingles on the surface of my skin. Something I've never felt before, but it's almost like a gentle touch of electric energy skating along my body. Her hurried movements are frantic, the scent of fear hitting me on the ocean breeze. She knows I'm watching her, and my hackles rise, my Wolf on full alert pawing at the ground and ready to pounce.

Not prey. Control. Calm. Center. Breathe.

Over and over I repeat the words to myself. And then before I know what I'm doing, she's running away from me and I'm chasing her. My strong Wolf legs catch up to her quickly. Darting off to the side, I run alongside her for a while until I sense *him*. He's too close. Much too fucking close to her, and his intentions, his curiosity about the scent of fear in the air pouring from her make me want to rip his fucking throat out.

No! Mine! Anger rips through me in a white hot rage and a growl erupts from my throat.

Rose turns toward me, the whites of her eyes fully visible under the terror frozen on her face. And then she trips. Something in me snaps and I find my paws surrounding her tiny body, her face down in the dirt. Protecting her.

I tell myself to just let her go, to turn and let her go, but I can't. This creature that has suddenly made me question everything I thought I knew about the world might be hurt. She might need a healer. I can't leave her injured for *him* to find. There's no telling what that beast will do to someone like her.

Something calls to me to unravel the secrets within this small, fragile Red. Something deep and feral inside that I don't fully understand myself. My Wolf nose nuzzles and sniffs her.

Blood. She's bleeding. Pushing her head to turn to the side, I pause taking in her light brown skin, the soft freckles that caress her nose and cheeks like a constellation of the most perfect stars in the sky. And...

What the fuck?! Anger slowly overtakes me. There's more red than just her blood. Red. Red. Red. All I see is the red...

Fuck!

Before the natural response that's engrained deep inside me takes over, I pull her hood down over her hair and turn to walk off. But she doesn't move. With an annoyed grunt, I return and put my nose under her arm, urging her to get up and run. Run back to the safety of her people. She's frozen in fear.

Goddamnit! Run! I growl.

Stepping back, I let the anger at my discovery and my sudden emotions hum in my chest, the growl turning more aggressive, more insistent. It would be so much easier if she could hear me.

Letting out a bark, I stomp at her. *Run, girl! Fucking run!*

She rolls into a crouch, deep green eyes boring into my own with fear and something else—a challenge? Is she challenging me? A small hand reaches up and pulls her wig back down, covering her secret, pinning it in place. But her eyes never leave mine.

The action is most definitely a challenge. She knows I saw, and she also knows I could kill her right now and be fully within my right to do so under the law.

Possibilities rush through my head. Can I kill this woman, this siren, and live with myself? Can I snuff out the one being that has made my heart race like it is right now? Can I do it and never know what it all means?

Cautiously, I take a few steps back, giving us both much needed space. Rose stands, keeping her eyes locked on mine and takes a few steps back from me, as well.

A branch snaps a few hundred yards to my left, my ears drawing my head to look in that direction. The brief distraction gives Rose the confidence to finally turn and run. Watching in the woods for *him*, I wait for a few minutes until I know she's close to her village and he's not following. And then I turn towards my own home and run.

I run for the safety of the damp ground and moss, for the chirp of the birds and the fragrance of the flowers. I run as fast as my legs will take me, away from the one that will undo me and the one I must kill at the same time.

And when I feel exhausted like I'll fall over and collapse...

I run some more.

Bursting out of the trees, the mountain looms in front of me, knowing and menacing. For generations beyond measure my pack and others like mine have called Mount Lunaris our home. The four snow capped peaks melt throughout the year and provide drinking water for us and the Reds down in the valley below.

While the weather is cool or snowy most of the year on the mountain, it's now the warming season and giant bugs fly about in hordes of flesh eating menaces. Usually, I'm found hiding high up in the cliffs among the remaining snow or in my cabin, but today that fucking Red has ruined those plans. Now I find myself trudging into the center of our large village with sweat dripping off my face. I can't tell if it's because of my run and the heat or the nerves at what comes next.

My weekly report is due in half an hour, and I don't know what to do. They'll know I'm lying, and I don't know if I want to reveal the truth about the Red just yet. There's something there. Something special calling

to the core of my being, and it's overriding everything I've ever been taught within my pack.

And it makes me hate her just a little more.

Slowly, I walk towards the meeting hall in my human form. At least this way they won't be able to hear my thoughts. But I can't stay human for long. The moons call to me even now during the day. I feel it on the edge of my mind, just out of reach, singing the Wolf's song. Two more weeks and I'll have no choice but to change for the full moons. I'll have no choice but to participate in the pack's rituals and then they'll know everything the moment I get too close to them.

Mind churning, guts roiling, I'm at war within myself of what to do. Do I tell them this fascinating, mysterious creature has the forbidden red hair before I'm able to figure out the puzzle of her that is plaguing me? Do I lie to my pack and risk punishment or worse, banishment? Can I live with them killing her before I'm able to sort out the truth of these foreign feelings invading me?

I hate her for making me feel this way. I hate her for hiding who she is and existing in the first place. And I hate myself for wanting to kill her simply for being alive with her Godsdamned red hair.

Fuuuccckkkkkkk!!!!!! I scream in my head, for if I did so aloud the attention would give me away.

Suddenly, everything becomes too much. Too much sound around me. Too many people and animals. Too much scent. My mind spins into a panic of what-ifs and horrible outcomes, her eyes and her hair, the smell of fear that came off of her.

A perfume of flowers assaults my senses and beckons me deeper into the forest, away from the mountains of my pack. As if in a trance, my feet swiftly carry me into the safety of the thick canopy, and that's where I find them amongst the brambles surrounding a downed tree.

Wild roses.

Wild roses have called to me. They've made me follow my senses until I found them. I sit on the downed tree, ignoring the brambles and vines

digging into my skin, and think. I think about every possible outcome for both options before me and come to a conclusion.

I can't live a single day of my life knowing she's dead and never finding out what it is that draws me to her. I can't live without knowing everything about her and the damned red hair that seems more like a promise of something than a curse and a plague.

So, I get up off my ass and walk to the meeting hall, ready to lie to my pack and blood family. All for her. All to save her, if only for a short time.



Family is blood. Family is life. Family is pack and eternity.

Before memories were formed in my mind, Aunt Daciana took me in and raised me as her own. The Alphas told me and the rest of the pack I was an orphan child of my uncle, Damon, who was killed in a battle alongside his true mate by a rogue band of outsiders.

A beta who left off into the continent to live his life apart from the pack, he was a free spirit. I've heard whispers of my father's views when it came to interbreeding and the Reds. He loved who he loved and made zero excuses or apologies. Rather than bringing some sort of shame or punishment down on himself and his mate, he chose to live apart, to live in secret. And that's all anyone said they knew. He lived a private, happy life.

Aunt Daciana spilled the rest of the truth in a drunken bout of darkness when I was sixteen. Burdened by the loss of her own mate years before I was born, she occasionally found herself in a dark place and sent me to stay with my grandparents or some other trusted member of the pack. On that particular night, I came home to retrieve something I forgot and found her sobbing by the fireplace and well into a bottle of something strong and dark.

“Auntie, are you alright?” Shocked to see her in that state, my inexperience didn’t tell me what to do.

“Yes, yes. Go away. You can’t see me like this. My parents will kill me.”

I remember the distinct feeling of shock and my eyes bulging from my head. When she saw my expression, a deep laugh escaped her.

“No, no. Not literally kill me, silly girl. Now go. Leave me be. This bottle and I have some secrets to share.”

My curiosity got the better of me. The warrior before me had never seemed weak a day in my life, but at that moment sadness edged the corners of her eyes and black pupils dilated and covered her irises. She looked like she was watching death, and I couldn’t leave the woman I most admired to be alone like that. So, I plopped down in the seat across from her, swiped the bottle, took a long and deep pull from it, and waited silently for her to speak.

“You’re a child, and I’m supposed to be your mother figure. Go now, before my hazy brain and loose tongue make me regret this night.”

I puffed up my chest and lowered my voice in what I thought was maturity. “I may be a child, but I am also part of this family. I am strong and brave and one day I’ll be a warrior just like you. You have secrets. I have questions. Let us bear our souls tonight because I’m tired of the lies that I know you all feed me.”

Daciana was quiet for a while, staring into the fire and contemplating her next move. Snatching the bottle back from me, she downed the remainder in a few deep swallows and slammed the bottle on the table.

“Very well, young one, but we’ll need another one of these.”

Hours later, revelations unfolded and who I thought I was burned to ash like the logs on the hearth. She told me of the Red couple who brought me in secret to the Alphas the day of the full moons while the pack was dormant and resting up for the night. She told me of how they had come to find me in a basket by the river, luckily or intentionally hung up in the willows.

The young couple kept me and raised me as their own for two years until the truth of what I was became undeniable and they were forced to give me up. My Wolf qualities were starting to show and, knowing they couldn't hide it or suppress it, they knew it was best that I be with my own kind. A young couple with no children of their own, barren for years, who'd finally been gifted a baby by the Gods and land, they were heartbroken at the finality.

"The Alphas sympathized with their pain since having lost two children of their own and they vowed to not only take in the child but to protect her with their lives. They promised to keep the child's origin a secret and to give her every chance at a good and safe life that they could. I was there when your Red parents turned you over. One look at the gold in your eyes and we knew. You look like him, you know. Just a little bit. It's mainly the eyes. The way the gold in them takes over the brown when you're full of mischief, just like your father, Damon. He was quite the brother." Daciana laughs and wipes the corners of her eyes, far off in her memories of the past.

Clearing my throat, I ask the question that is burning inside of me. "And what of my mother?"

She snapped back to the present at the sound of my voice, looking resigned to answer me but did so softer than I'd ever heard her speak to anyone. "We don't know who your mother is or if Damon knew about you since you arrived as a toddler shortly after his death. The pack would never accept an unknown so the Alphas thought it was best to lie."

"So she wasn't another Wolf found alongside him in death? Did he even die in battle?"

"No, he didn't. We found him dead after being unable to live without his true mate. By the time you came to us, he'd been with this other woman for a few years and we're certain she wasn't your mother."

Illegitimate. The words tumbled around in my head and crashed against the walls of my skull in a tumultuous wave of throbbing pain.

I knew it. My entire life I felt like something was off. Like I was just a little different, looked a little different. Hell, I felt and still feel different.

They've never treated me as anything but their own, but it's always there whispering in my mind that a piece of me is missing or hiding.

When Daciana told me the truth it reaffirmed questions I'd always had about what I called my apartness. Little things like why I feel a connection to nature more than my pack does? I always hate killing animals even if it's necessary to feed my carnivore. I hate unnecessary violence but am quick to anger. Loud noises, being touched by most people, certain smells are things I avoid. And I don't look like any of them, except for the gold eyes that I found out I share with my father. Even my Wolf has black fur, something that singles me out from the rest of the pack.

Back then in my young sixteen year old mind, I quickly came to a conclusion. It didn't matter. The pack was and is my home. The Alphas and Aunt Daciana are my family. And I am a Wolf, no matter the origins of the other half of me.

No tears or anger came, only relief at her words. "Thank you, Auntie, for finally telling me the truth."

"Please don't tell them I told you. They'll never forgive me."

"They will, but don't worry. I won't. It doesn't matter in the long run. You're my family."

"That's right, my girl. You're ours. I knew it from the moment your chubby little hand reached out and touched my cheek the first time I held you. It was like love shot through my cold, dead heart and a spark was created just for you. A spark that still burns to this day. You're the only joy I've felt since I lost my mate."

She smiled and gazed into the fire, lost in her memories.

Even now, years later, it's not the worst thing to know where I started. Questions arise when something strange happens that I can't put my finger on. Like when I didn't kill the Red immediately and something called on me to protect her from the threat looming in the forest.

I guess some things have to be let go because I'll never know the answer to them, but the Red is a puzzle I'm determined to solve.

Or kill.

CHAPTER 3

ROSE

Tears and blood stream down my face. I don't know why I'm crying, the pain from the cuts isn't anything more than an annoyance. But her eyes...her fucking eyes.

Golden eyes framed by black fur invade my vision. I can't see anything but her. The moment I crouched in a challenge and she locked eyes with me I knew it. She should have killed me instantly, but she didn't. Why?

Muscles in my legs scream for relief. I'm so fucking tired of running, but I'm not safe. The way she snapped her attention from me to something off in the forest, there's something more dangerous than her out there.

It was the growl that drew my attention and sent me tumbling over that damn root. Not so much of a threat to me but more like...a claim?

No. That can't be right, but I haven't been around enough Wolves to decipher her meaning.

Her? Why do I keep calling it a 'her' in my head?

Bursting through the pungent fruit trees, I cross the barrier to my village and into safety. Whoever was out in those woods besides me and the black one can't come here without the Proctors or risk facing severe punishment. I'm not sure why they protect those of us who are still alive if we're such a threat and born of disease and plague, but they do.

Maybe killing off everyone with red hair and power has reduced the threat. I don't know. And I don't know anyone to ask but grandma, but I can't do that. She's under enough stress with her shedding disease. I'll have to find another way to get information, but who? There's no one left. No one and no written histories. The Wolves made sure of that during the Burning Times.

Scorched ground to the east of my village is a reminder of their power and our inability to protect ourselves. It's a reminder to do as we're told or we too will become nothing but blackened earth.

"Shit!" I say to myself, forgetting I'm back under watchful eyes and have a role to play.

Some days I'm tired, too tired to play along. And today has become one of those days. Pulling the hood on my cape down, I wrap myself tightly in its false safety and hurry home. I can't tell anyone what happened in the woods. I have no one, not anymore.

The back porch door creaks when I open it and gives me away to my mother who's working hard over the fire to make the family's supper.

"Rose, my love. How did it go?" Her eyes soften when she sees me, but a tinge of worry invades them at the sight of the blood on my face.

"It was fine. Just tripped in the woods. Nothing serious."

"Oh, that's good. You took a little longer than normal. Thought you ran into trouble."

"Sorry to worry you, mother."

"Mm hm. Well, wash up. Almost supper time."

"Where's Fern?"

"Eating dinner with the Woodbournes."

"And Bear?"

"If I had to guess, he'd be harassing the blacksmith. That boy is going to drive poor Imogen crazy with his hundred questions. Seems he wants to be

her apprentice.”

“Oh really? That sounds promising.”

“He’s ten years old, Rose. Boys that age want to get into everything and anything. I suspect he’s only bothering her because she has the good sweets from the human village.”

I chuckle picturing my feisty little brother annoying the shit out of the large human woman who’s been our village blacksmith for as long as I can remember. Imogen is the take no shit, tough as nails type. If I didn’t know better I’d think she was a warrior, but I do, and she’s no warrior. Just a nice human who fell in love with one of our kind and stayed.

Thinking about my village and all who are at risk because of my existence, my heart aches deeply with a pain I’ve never known. The faces I’ve come to love, the lives they have made here. Humans, Reds, powerless in a community of togetherness.

What if that Wolf tells her pack? I’ve killed us all. I fucking know it, but I can’t tell anyone. I can’t warn anyone. If my own people knew about my red hair, they would turn me in for fear of retaliation if they got caught hiding my secret.

But now, the secret is out to the enemy, and I don’t know what to do but wait for the inevitable.

Death.



Death doesn’t come that night or the next, so I return to my normal daily duties. Picking herbs is one of my favorite things to do, and most days it’s easy since everyone ignores me and lets me go about my business mostly undetected.

It's hot. Too hot for this time of year, but Fern and I don our red capes and trudge east towards the river. There's a patch of chamomile on the other side, but crossing the bridge into Wolf territory is dangerous even with the capes on.

"Oh my Gods, Rose, you wouldn't believe what Rowan said to me!"

"Let me guess. You're so beautiful, like no one he's ever met, didn't know he had these feelings for you, no one will know if you drop your skirt before the handfasting ceremony, blah blah blah."

A quick hand reaches out and slaps me on the shoulder before I'm able to move away. "You bitch! Noooooo, he didn't say that." She's quiet for a minute, and I look over at her with an eyebrow raised in my best I'm not buying that look. "Okay, well he didn't just say all of that. You know, it's scary how easily you read people sometimes."

"It's not hard to know what a twenty year old man is thinking when he looks at someone as pretty as you, sister."

"Awwww. That's the nicest thing you've said to me this week."

"I mean, your boobs are huge. How can he not want to rut you like a wild beast?"

"And there it is. Bitch!" she giggles. "Anywaysssss. He said he wants to move the ceremony up to next month. Do you think mother and father will go for it? I mean, our marital home isn't ready, yet. With it being birthing season for the pigs and mother's herbs being in high demand and the underground Wolf visits, there hasn't been time for anyone to do anything extra."

"We'll find the time, Fern. Don't worry. If this is what you want, we'll find the time to do what's needed."

She stops walking, and I take a few steps before I realize she's not beside me anymore. Turning to her, tears glisten in her blue eyes. "It's what I really want, Rose. So much."

"Then why are you crying?"

“Because I worry about you. What will you do once I’m gone?” She closes the space between us and crushes me to her, face buried in my neck. “And how will you keep up your role without me beside you? I mean, don’t you want to live a normal life one day? Don’t you want to have a husband of your own?”

I’m silent while I think, clutching onto my sister for courage. We’ve never discussed my future. It’s always been a day-by-day, week-by-week existence for me. At any moment, the Wolves could take me out. The reality of my mortality is more pressing now that the black one with the gold eyes saw my red hair slip out from under my wig.

But the feeling of when she looked at me, those gold eyes on me, the danger I felt but also something else I can’t place...

Sighing loudly, I give Fern the only answer I know to give her. I’ve practiced it over and over in my head in preparation for this exact moment.

“Fern, I’m more worried about living and protecting all of you than tying myself to another person. It’s not in the stars for me, but it is for you.” Pulling back, I hold her upper arms tightly and bore into her crystal blue eyes, so innocent and pure at this moment. “And you will be a beautiful bride.”

Her smile grows and spreads across her entire face. “Yes, I will,” she agrees proudly.

Hand in hand, we walk through the forest and to the bridge at the river. I sniff the air, not finding any recent hint of Wolf, and give the all clear.

“Quickly, Fern. Take this list and gather these river plants. I’ll get the ones we need from the meadow.”

“But you said it was just chamomile.”

“I know.” With a wink, I rush into the meadow and search for the first plant on my list.

Kneeling down at the red bulb atop a stem of thistles, I gingerly cut off the amount I need. I repeat the process of searching for plants and herbs

through the rest of my list without realizing how far into the meadow I've come. Turning back towards the river, Fern stands at the bridge, but she's much too far away. I'm much too far away.

Danger.

Something hits my senses and alerts me to a presence. I don't smell it until it's too late. Head snapping back around to the meadow, I see it off in the distance laying amongst the lavender.

Wolf!

Turning and running will give it a reason to chase. Taking my eyes off of it gives it a chance to move without me noticing until it's too late. Doing the only thing I can think of, I pull my red cape tighter around me and back through the meadow towards my sister.

Step by agonizing step, I walk slowly to avoid activating its prey drive. Just when I think it's going to let me go, it stands and walks towards me. The distance between us closes quickly, too quickly.

"Rose! Run!" Fern's voice is an ear-splitting scream, drawing the Wolf's attention from me.

"Fern, be quiet! Cross the bridge. I'll be right there," I shout back to her, not fully believing my own words over the real possibility that I'm about to have my heart eaten out.

"I won't leave you!"

"You will! I'll be fine! Go now!" I bark at her. I risk a glance over my shoulder to make sure she's going and then zone back in on the Wolf quickly approaching me.

Black fur and gold eyes. It's her. She's finally come for me.

Resolved in my fate, I stop walking and wait for her to perform her duties. I'm a threat. I'm cursed, diseased. She's bound by the treaty and Wolf law to kill me now that she knows my secret.

Heart pounding in my chest, palms slick with sweat, I drop my basket, the contents spilling out. And with my imminent death staring me down and

mere feet away, all I can think is was it fecking worth it? All of this for some plants and herbs. I risked my life and am forfeiting it for plants and herbs that Fern and Bear could have safely gotten without me.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I chastise myself internally, and then stop.

Black Wolf is two feet from me, and when I make eye contact with her, when I really look into her gold eyes, my breath catches in my throat. But it's not for fear. It's something I don't have a name for.

Curiosity, maybe?

She's not looking at me like she's angry or going to kill me. Not right now. It's more questioning than that. More like she's trying to ask me something that I'm not able to hear. Minutes tick by of us staring at each other, unmoving.

"Rose?" Fern screeches from the other side of the bridge.

"I'm fine! Stay where you are!"

The Wolf cocks her head as if asking a question.

"Twin sister," I answer, and she nods.

Bending down, she nudges my basket and begins pushing my plants and herbs back towards it.

"Oh, thanks." I bend down to help pick up my things, her Wolf face inches from my hand.

I'm not sure what comes over me, but I have the urge to touch her and find out if she's as soft as she looks. Without asking, I reach up and stroke the fur along the side of her face.

She freezes for a moment, side-eyeing my hand and then a deep growl warns me to back off.

"I'm s-sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. Curious, I guess."

She chuffs in response, an annoyed sound that's very similar to something my sister does when I annoy her.

Grabbing the final plant, I place it into my basket and then stop. Her eyes look over me in assessment, zoning in on the light scar left on my face from the fall in the forest during our first meeting. Her eyes soften, almost remorseful.

And then she moves closer, into my space, her large body much too close to my small frame. My instincts scream at me to run, but where can I go? She can catch me in a few easy strides. I lean as far back from her as I can get and then fall back and land on my ass.

Coming closer, towering over me, she's now straddling my body, her face inches from my own. Hands behind me, I lean backward until I'm completely flat on my back and surrounded by wildflowers. A huge mass of black fur blocks out the sun.

"Please don't kill me. Not today," I whisper. "Just let me see my sister's handfasting ceremony next month. Please, please, please, don't kill me in front of my sister." Warm breath heats the side of my face as I turn my head to the side, readying myself for the killing bite. A tear leaks from my eye and down the bridge of my nose.

This is it. This is where I die. At least the wildflowers are tall enough that Fern won't be able to see it happen. Fern...

More tears seep from my eyes at the thought of missing everything in her life, at missing her, my other half.

"Just get it over with," I whisper, my voice shaky.

But death doesn't come. Instead, a warm, velvety tongue touches my cheek, gently tasting my tears.

Before I can fully process what just happened, the sun returns and she's gone.

CHAPTER 4

SAMIRA

What the fuck just happened? What did I do?

Once again, I find myself running away from the strange creature that invades my every thought. I should have killed her. The risks are known with Reds, and she is one of the forbidden.

Isolating myself from my pack, refusing to shift unless the moons are full and I have no choice, I've been trying to work out what exactly it all means. The meadow is one of my favorite places to get away and think. But then there she was, the place I least expected her to be. Humming to herself and drawing me closer.

How did she know I was there? Thinking back on the moment she realized she wasn't alone, it was more like she sensed me before she saw me. I was upwind and out of sight, but then she zeroed in on me like my natural camouflage meant nothing. And when those green eyes showed fear, something deep within me made me want to reassure her that there was none with me.

But why?

My heart thrums with an unfamiliar feeling beyond the exertion I'm forcing on my body with the speed I'm running away. It's the memory of her eyes, her fear, my need to be close to her, to smell her, to *taste* her.

Fuck.

I tasted her tears. I can still taste her tears. So sweet. So addictive. I want to taste more. More tears. More of the forbidden Rose.

Gods, I am so fucked.



Exhaustion takes over my body as I trudge along the path from the mountains back towards my cabin. It's been six days since my encounter with Rose. Six days since I've smelled her and tasted her forbidden essence. In that time, I've done everything I can to keep my mind off her and wear myself out so I collapse in a heap at night.

From training, to chopping wood, to extra patrols on the northeastern side of our territory, nothing seems to be enough to keep her out of my head for very long. Even at night, when I'm so exhausted and sore that I think death might be a nice reprieve to waking the next day and starting all over, there's only her when I close my eyes.

The image of her laying beneath me in the wildflowers with tears leaking down her face...

"Uuuggghhhhhh!!!" I groan and punch a small tree, sending it toppling over.

"Something on your mind?" The voice coming up behind me startles me and makes me jump.

"Alaric, hey! I didn't hear you coming. We should put a bell on you or something." Embarrassment colors my cheeks. I'm the Alpha's granddaughter, and I just got snuck up on because I'm too busy being lost in my head.

Idiot!

“I’ve been practicing my stealth. Good to know it’s paying off. You good?” Kind eyes look me over from top to bottom, pausing for a second too long at my chest.

It’s no secret Alaric is interested in me and working up the courage to make his move. Looking him over, I can see where he would be a desirable mate for someone. But unfortunately for him, that someone isn’t me. He’s more like a brother than anything else. I just hope he won’t make me say it and can take a hint. Years of flirting and looks without me returning them should be enough, but males can be daft and don’t usually take hints well. With the way he’s looking at me right now with lust in his eyes, it seems he’s on the daft side of his gender.

“So, Samira, I was wondering—”

But I cut him off before shit gets even more awkward. “Oh, look at the time, I gotta go. See you around.” I jog off down the path and don’t look back. My pace doesn’t slow until I hit my porch. The sun has set and it’s dark in the shadows, so I take a moment to play over what just happened in my head and groan in embarrassment.

“Running from Alaric again?” A deep female voice makes me jump.

Shit! That’s twice in one day. I’m fucking slipping!

“Daciana, heeeyyy. What can I do for you?”

“Two things. Invite me inside for a drink and tell me why you’re avoiding everyone.”

Double shit! I thought I was playing it off as hard work.

Ten minutes later, we’re sitting by the fire and sipping on the strongest thing I have. The warmth of the alcohol coats my throat and warms my belly, giving me a semblance of courage.

“Well?” She’s annoyed with my stalling. She’s always annoyed, but generally not at me.

“Well, who’s noticed and who sent you?”

“No one has noticed, thus no one sent me. Just your aunt being nosy and concerned. That all right with you, Sammie?”

“Sammie? Breaking out the nicknames, huh? You must be really concerned,” I chuckle into my drink and take a huge swallow.

She leans forward and stares me down. “Not overly concerned but somewhat. Now stop stalling and talk.”

My mind is moving in a million directions, screaming at me to tell her the truth, not tell her the truth. Will she kill Rose? Will she turn me in? Can I trust her to care for me over the pack? Over our laws?

Quickly, I come to an answer to my questions, and it hurts. “I’m not necessarily avoiding everyone. Just expectations, I guess.”

“Explain,” she demands in her husky no nonsense voice.

“Well, I realize I’m twenty-four. There are expectations I have to live up to when it comes to being in the Alpha’s bloodline, but I’m not ready.”

“You’re talking about being mated, right?”

“Yes. I don’t want to be mated. Not to Alaric. Not to anyone. I just want to live my life however I see fit, and right now that means training and working.”

“You know you can talk to me.” She’s earnest, almost soft even. At least as soft as she can be given her gruff nature.

“I know, but I don’t want to talk. I want to do anything but talk.”

“I understand not wanting to talk, but you can’t avoid your familial and pack responsibilities forever. You’re the last of the bloodline.”

“You don’t have to remind me.” I’ve known about the expectations my grandmother and grandfather have for me since I hit puberty. I’m supposed to save the bloodline from extinction by mating and having a whole litter of babies. But it’s my body and my life. Ultimately, it’s my decision, no matter the pressure they place on me.

“Just think about it. There are worse mates out there than Alaric. He’s a warrior and kind and pretty fucking hot. Any woman would be happy to be mated to that one.”

“Any woman but me. This conversation is over, Daciana. I’m tired and need a bath.”

She sniffs obnoxiously. “Yes, you definitely do, but think about what I said. Find me if you want to talk.”

I raise my glass in a toast rather than appease her request. If I wanted to talk to anyone then I would have done so already. I don’t want to talk. I can’t talk. Not with light brown skin, green eyes, and red hair invading my thoughts and dreams.

A few hours and many many drinks later, I’m tossing and turning in bed begging for sleep to come. Those green eyes and the way she tasted keep playing over and over in my head. Her sweet voice humming is so vivid that it feels like she’s in the same room as me.

Then, it hits me. Her scent. Her sweet, pure, Red scent.

Tingling between my thighs turns to an obnoxious throb. This woman is going to drive me insane. That or I’ll die from exhaustion. It’s hot, too damn hot. Even with my sheer sleep top on, I feel like I’m wearing wool.

Jumping from the bed, I run to the window and look up at the moons. Nope. Not getting close to the change.

“Fuck! I just want to sleep!” I grumble to myself.

Pulling my shirt over my head, standing in the window with the cool night air blowing in on my skin, I feel a little better, a little less hot. But then I picture her face down in the dirt with me standing over her body, and I can smell the fear mingled with her scent again.

I let out a groan and flop back onto my bed. Face down in my pillow, I run a hand over my breast, stopping to pinch my taught nipple. It’s been a long time since I had any form of desire, like it went dormant in my body. But now—fuck—now it feels like I’m on fire.

My needy clit throbs loudly, drawing my hand down the soft skin of my abdomen and skirting under my panties.

I shouldn't. It's wrong. Not with her on my mind. Forbidden.

These thoughts are racing through my head, but my baser desires get the best of me in a moment of weakness as I slide a finger through my slick slit to find my aching clit.

Breath hitches in my throat and I stop. My inner monologue starts to make sense, and my hand retreats until those eyes flash into my mind. Those damn green eyes, so innocent but so brave. She was ready to die beneath me. Ready for me to sink my teeth into her soft, warm throat.

I moan loudly, my fangs growing to a sharp point, and slip my fingers back between my folds and find my achy, needy bud. Dipping a finger inside, I drag the wetness back to my clit and bite into my pillow.

Circling it slowly at first, my body screams for more so I go faster, harder. Still my body screams for more as I pant and whimper quietly.

Moving my fingers down, I slide them into my dripping pussy and then grind my throbbing clit onto my palm. Hips circling and grinding down into my hand, my fingers pulse inside of me as I fuck myself while thoughts of Rose run through my mind, invading me, and drive me closer to release.

Her scent, my fingers pulse faster inside me. Her voice, my clit grinds down harder on my palm. Her throat, my teeth sink further into my pillow with a ripping sound as I pierce the fabric. But I'm fantasizing it's her throat I'm piercing, her blood I'm tasting, her gasp I'm hearing instead of my own.

"Fuck! Ahhhh, fuck!" I murmur into my pillow.

Ass grinding and bobbing, fucking my own fingers, I dream that it's hers inside of me, that it's her clit rubbing against mine.

And then it hits me. The apex of pleasure I was chasing so desperately. Pressing my face into my pillow so my screams can't be heard, my muscles tighten down on my fingers and I cum in torrents of pleasure. My

body quakes with each wave that hits me, over and over, while I milk every drop from myself.

Finally, the waves feel like they've ebbed and my touch becomes too sensitive to bear. Removing my hand, I lay face down with my arms and legs splayed out around me and fall asleep with red hair, green eyes, light brown skin, and freckles on my mind.

CHAPTER 5

ROSE

Fern wouldn't leave me alone about what happened when the Wolf stood over me, but I couldn't tell her the truth. It's been a week, and I feel guilty as feck for lying to her, but it's something I can't tell anyone. Not because I'm ashamed or afraid, but because I don't understand it myself.

I don't understand why she didn't kill me when she has the right to do so. And I really don't understand why I enjoyed the feel of her tongue on my face or why the rush of adrenaline I got from having such a powerful animal standing over me kept me up that night.

Her tongue. Feck. What was that?

Lost in my thoughts, I don't hear mother coming into the hut until she pulls out the chair across from me and sits at the table.

"You seem distracted lately, Rose. What's been goin' on with you, baby?"

I smile at the term of endearment. I'm far from a baby. Twenty-two is much longer than any of us expected me to be allowed to live. Reminiscing on the years, I can't believe I've made it this long without being found out.

Gold eyes surrounded by black fur flash in my mind, and I realize I've been lost in my head and forgot to answer mother.

“Oh, um, sorry. Nothing really. Just thinking about Fern’s handfasting coming up so quickly.” I keep my hands busy but notice the shaking as I weave flowers into the wreath that will decorate their marital home.

“Two days and she’ll be a married woman. It seems like Rowan Woodbourne was just asking your father and I for her hand a few days ago.” Mom grabs a bunch of flowers and starts on the garland for the ceremonial arch. “Are you sad your twin is leaving us and starting her own family?”

“No, not sad. I guess I’m relieved that one of us is able to live a normal life. As normal as it can be with the Wolves and inspections and laws.”

Mother becomes quiet and draws my attention. Tears fill her eyes but she fights to keep them from spilling over. She’s the strongest woman I know, next to my grandma, but I guess she learned it from somewhere.

“Mother? You okay?”

“Yeah, baby. I’m happy for Fern. And I hope you can find your one true love one day, too.”

Something in me switches then. Not because I’m angry with mother but because I’m angry with our position in our world. “Mother, let’s be honest with each other. Every day I get to live is a gift. No one can ever know about me, not even our closest friends. They’ll turn me in to save themselves.”

“You don’t know that, baby. They all love you.”

“No, they love who they think I am. Simple Rose Riverbourne. They don’t know the real me. If they did, they would do just like other Reds have done in the past. Sacrifice one to save many. The journals and hidden histories have it documented over and over again.”

Mother chokes and sputters, taking a minute to gather her breath again before she questions me with wide eyes. “And how do you know about the journals and hidden histories?”

“I have my ways,” I wink at her.

“And I need to have words with your grandma, it seems.” Pink coloring creeps up her neck and covers her chest. She’s cute when she’s angry.

I only chuckle as I continue weaving flowers into the wreath, silently making plans to visit the hidden archives. Whatever it is that’s drawing me to the Wolf has to mean something, and I’m going to find out what before we run into each other again.



Musty, damp earth lulls me into a false safety while I sit among hundreds of years of secrets and forbidden tomes. The hidden archives lie beneath what used to be my grandma’s hut, but now sits empty and leaden with dust. A tomb of knowledge just waiting to be discovered.

When the Wolves enacted their laws and changed our entire existence, they burned anything that seemed important to us, both culturally and educationally. Living and dead bodies burned on the pyre, and our books and histories were used to stoke the flames.

Elders saw it coming when the relationship between our two creatures turned sour, and they hid away what they could. Magick within my people and in the land was once harvested to heal and protect. The union of the Alphas’ most prized daughter and the highly magickally gifted son of our village Elders was a celebration. Wolves and Reds were free to bond and mate back then but something happened to ruin it all, and it tore our two kinds apart at the seams.

For generations, we’ve been taught we’re diseased, cursed even, and that the Wolves executed those of us with red hair like mine to keep both themselves and us safe. They say our magick was killed off because it’s wrong, dangerous.

Now, sitting amongst pages and scrolls, secret writings and journals, the only thing I’ve come to realize is it’s all a fucking lie. Wolves rewrote our

histories and continue to tell my people they formed the Guard and Proctors and keep us oppressed because we are dangerous if our power is allowed to return. That lie has been passed down and become fact rather than the fiction it is. The more I read, the more angry I get at the filth that has been force fed to us through violence and coercion.

A worn, leather bound journal sits on a table in the center of the tiny hidden room. My back aches from crouching over it for so long but curiosity pushes me forward. It's the oldest writings I've found so far, and inside it tells a very different story of a time before the Guard and Proctors existed.

I pray to the ground that my feet walk
upon every day, to the sky above me
that keeps me grounded and brings the
rains, to the plants and trees, the
animals and the river—

Please don't let my brother die.

The Wolves are furious. They think
we've done something to the wild game.

The deer aren't breeding. The boars are
plagued with a disease. Only the rabbits
seem to be prospering, and they blame
us.

They say we magicked the land against
them, as if that is even a possibility.

Their Alpha has gone on to her next
life, followed closely behind by her mate.
Four hundred years of life were enough
and she chose to move on. She chose to
go, but they blame us for that, too.

We are innocent. We are people of the
land, of nature. We love and nurture,
heal and help. There is not a single soul
in my community that would do harm to
any, for it's the most unforgivable
transgression amongst our people.

Our main law: Do harm to none.

It's in our marrow. We are peaceful,
but still they blame us for things they
can't explain.

I guess it's easy to have a scapegoat
when your heart is hurting and you're
too scared to face the truth.

They did something so wrong that nature
is choosing to repay them.

I hope for my peoples' sake the Wolves
are able to see the truth. Maybe the
next Alphas will have their third eye
open wide.

Or maybe they'll be just as bad—or
worse.

Gods, I wish there was a way to keep
my people safe.

—May

The wolves have kicked us out of their land. They say we're not allowed in the mountains anymore.

My brother has been missing for weeks with no sign of what happened to him. His peace offering during their time of mourning was found along the trail on the other side of the forest at the base of the mountains...

With blood. Lots of blood.

His terrified horse and damaged carriage were found still fully loaded with goods some distance away deep within the trees, a dark slash of claw marks raked down the hind quarters of the animal.

Every day since I've prayed for my brother. It could've been the horse's blood. They could be holding him prisoner. Maybe he's hiding somewhere in the woods or ran off with his betrothed wolf love.

Like the rest of my family, the red hair
upon my head signals my magick.

Dormant until I turn sixteen I can
still feel it deep within my bones like a
gentle hum. Somedays I wish I had
my powers already. I wish I had my
brother. I wish this nightmare wasn't
real and I could wake.

But it is real.

The only thing I can do is continue to
wait for answers, and it's breaking me.

-May

The new Alpha and her mate have been throned and with them some relief came. My brother was returned to us broken but not dead. It's all I prayed for, to have him back. He said he tried to explain to them, but couldn't get through to their beasts 'for wolves are unable to speak the words of man.'

Reika and Rikon are their names.

They seem much more logical than the last, but still I'm leary. My people are allowed back in the mountains and life has resumed as normal.

For now.

I don't trust it to last. Wolves are hot headed and quick to jump to false conclusions. The animal illness and shortage were discovered to be of nature and not of magick, just as we tried to tell them.

Life is back to normal, but I've vowed to find another means of protecting us for the next time. My marrow tells me there will be a next time. I don't know when, but I'll be better prepared to protect my own.

Magick is the savior. I just have to find the right kind.

-May

Turning the final page, I close the journal and sit dumbstruck. The writings are from well before my grandma was born, which was around the time the interbreeding bans and Guard came to be.

So what happened to make everything go from normal again to how our lives are now?

For hours I search through shelves for anything else that can tell me what really happened. I don't believe we're diseased or cursed. May said she was going to find another kind of magick to help her protect her people.

Would something like that help me protect my people now?

The hours tick by while I come up empty handed, weariness seeping deeply into my muscles and bones. It's probably time for supper. My hunt for truth and knowledge will have to wait for another day.

I can't get her words out of my mind as I walk back to my hut. 'Magick is the savior...the right kind.' Is there more than one kind of magick?

CHAPTER 6

SAMIRA

“Move your ass, young Alpha.” Fenris taunts me from the side of the sparring ring with a lurid tone. The way his eyes cascade over my body in my fighting leathers is disgusting. It’s one of the reasons I usually avoid sparring with the pack, but today I woke up feeling compelled to come.

Hand-to-hand combat has never been my strongest skill, but after coming in such close contact repeatedly with that delicious Red I’ve decided I might need to work on it. I don’t trust her. It feels like she’s hiding something besides the color of her hair. While appearing demure and timid, power oozes from her in waves that call to me and threaten to pull me under. Like a wave of lust tingling through my body, my hair raises and I salivate anytime I’m near her. And it’s not just because she’s beautiful and smells like a forbidden fruit I want to eat.

She could easily cut my throat next time we interact.

Wait. Do I want there to be a next time? Should there be a next time?

The answer is yes and absolutely not. What I want and what should happen are polar opposites. She’s dangerous. That’s what we’ve been told. That’s what’s deeply engrained in our minds.

Red equals dead. Period.

Even so, I imagine those eyes staring back at me all wide and doe-like, and I can't see Rose hurting anyone. Her small frame. Her dainty hands. The freckles pebbled across her nose. The bow of her upper lip and fullness of her lower—

My mind is somewhere else, but the feeling of weightlessness brings me back, followed up by my back hitting the mat with an oxygen stealing thud. Alaric has just flipped me over and thrown me to the ground like I weigh less than a feather.

The smirk on his face makes me want to punch it off, but I gather my willpower and resist. Instead, I choose to wallow in self-deprecation on the ground while I try to catch my breath.

“Where's your brain at, Sammie?” Alaric chuckles.

“It's. Samira,” I pant out through gritted teeth. The term of endearment is reserved for a select few, and he's definitely not one of them.

“My bad, Samira. So you dead or what because I could use a pint. How about it?” A warm, bronzed hand reaches down to help me up, and with only a few seconds of hesitation I take it.

“Thanks,” I mumble. “A pint sounds good.” I walk towards the path, grabbing my jacket off a nearby fallen tree and call back over my shoulder. “But you're buying.”

An hour and many pints later, I'm plastered to my seat at the village bar watching young male Wolves shoot their shot with the females only to be shot down. It's amusing. I was once one of those young females who enjoyed hanging out in a group and gossiping, but those days are long gone.

“You know Fenris has it in for you, right?” With a deep swallow, Alaric assesses me over the top of his mug of ale.

“Haven't noticed. Seems like he has it in for everyone.”

“Yeah, he's a dick to everyone, but you're different. He wants to break you and parade you around like a trophy. The granddaughter of the Alpha. He thinks he'll have infinite authority and power if you two are mated.”

The alcohol I'm swallowing gets caught in my throat, and I sputter around it. "Mate? With him?!"

"Yeah. He's not quiet about it, either. Fenris wants power, and you're directly tied to it. Seems like a logical solution to him."

"Seems like he wants to have his balls ripped off to me. Trophy. Pffttt! He'd be lucky if I allowed him to lick my boots clean."

"Figured you felt that way. Look, Samira, he's a total asshole, womanizer, power hungry, and dangerous. He's seen a lot of combat. It doesn't matter that he's assigned to a lower stress job and not in the Guard. That doesn't make him less deadly, less of a threat. He wants to make you belong to him, claim you, and use you. And he'll stop at nothing to make that happen. He's not shy about it. Everyone knows."

I think on that for a while, coming to my own conclusions in silence.

"Including my grandparents?"

"Yes. Including them."

"Hmph. Seems I need to pay them a visit. Until then, let's have a few more pints while you catch me up on the pack gossip. What say you, Alaric?"

"I say cheers!" His large, warm smile beams at me, not a single care in the world. Alaric is a good person. Fearless in battle and in duty, he's a calming force in private. If it wasn't for the obvious crush he has on me, he might be my best friend.

But that would take trust. Something I can't afford to give anyone.



It's not common for anyone, even family, to show up at the Alphas' home, but I find myself knocking on their door the next morning. Roast pork wafts through the cabin and out to me causing my stomach to rumble obnoxiously.

“There’s a starving Wolf at our door, Rikon. Answer it quickly before they break in to steal our meal,” my grandmother’s warm, deep voice chuckles from the kitchen causing me to blush.

Wolf ears hear everything, and the moment the door opens and deep brown eyes set in a round, kind face greet me I know they knew it was me the entire time.

“Samira, my favorite granddaughter, come in.” Rikon holds his arms out and I dive into them for an embrace. A large man and fierce protector of my grandmother, Rikon is the embodiment of what a grandfather should be. The silver streak running through his brown hair only hints that he may not be as young as he looks. It’s like both of their faces have refused to age, but that is the nature of Wolves.

Aging is slow for us while healing is fast. We rarely get sick, nor do we usually die of natural causes. Our advanced healing seems to always be at work. In the twenty-four years I’ve been alive, we’ve only lost Wolves in battles and of their own choosing.

Pressed against his massive chest, I hear his steady heartbeat, and it gives me strength.

“Grandfather, I’m so happy to see you. My apologies for the unannounced visit.”

He clucks his tongue in admonishment. “No blood of mine will ever have to make an appointment to see me. Come, child. We’re just sitting down to breakfast, and your stomach can probably be heard in the mountains. Let’s eat.”

Reika is seated at the simple dining table in the kitchen, pouring three glasses of piping hot tea. The herbs are familiar, soothing, and I want nothing more than to sink into that cup and never come out. Sensing emotions is a gift that she’s kept quiet, for how long I don’t know. Grandmother seems to always know the right thing to say or do for someone to bring them ease or influence their emotions.

Today, she’s chosen calm for me, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

“Sweet girl, come sit,” she motions to the third place setting at the table and starts to pile our plates high with meats and vegetables. The fragrance wafting off the caramelized pork makes my mouth water in a very unladylike manner, but I don’t care. I’ve never been one for formalities or highbred manners.

Instinctively, I reach out for their hands before sinking my growing teeth into my food.

“Mother of the Moons and of Nature. Mother of Creation and Death. We thank you this morning for seeing another rise and fall of the moons and for the gift of the animals and gifts from the ground that we are about to consume. We call upon you for a prosperous day and peace for our people. Blessed be thy, Mother.”

“Blessed be,” grandfather and I say in unison.

The moment our hands release we all dive into our food with reckless abandon. To be a Wolf means a lot of things, but one that I’ve found most annoying is my endless hunger. The closer to full moons aligning, the more hunger calls to us. It’s those times that we are all the most vicious. Anything warm blooded that is unfortunate enough to come across us is as good as dead and eaten. It’s a battle within myself that I try to control.

Plate empty, Reika settles back in her chair and sips on her tea, assessing me over the rim of the ornate cup. It looks like something a child would play with in her large hand, reminding me of the power she holds. Warm and kind in appearance, the woman before me is a fierce Wolf and warrior. She’s lived as our Alpha for a century, at least, fought alongside the Guard and our most honored warriors, and protected our people from the disease brought by the Reds. I admire her. Maybe one day I can be half of the Wolf that she is.

“So, most beloved granddaughter, what brings you here so early?”

“Well, I’m your only granddaughter so I hope I’m your most beloved,” I chuckle. “But I’m afraid my visit isn’t just because I missed your face. It seems I have a problem with Fenris.”

“Ahhhh, Fenris.” My grandfather’s deep voice sounds annoyed. “That one is a nuisance more frequently than I care to admit.”

“Indeed,” Reika agrees. “What’s he done now?”

“Well, it seems he wants to make me his mate.”

“We’ve heard the rumors.” Reika’s voice is low, annoyed. “Not that any Wolf wouldn’t be lucky to have you, but him? Why would he think he even stood a chance?”

“It’s not as simple as courting and winning me over, grandmother. He wishes to break me, to own me, to trot me around like a prized horse.”

Rikon sucks his breath in through his teeth next to me. Loudly, he slams his cup down on the table. “Well, he can just fuck off! You are not property or a prize to be won. You’re the Alpha’s only granddaughter and heir to the throne if she chooses to pass it down to you. That filthy swine doesn’t stand a chance with a Wolf of your caliber.”

Grandmother sips her tea and considers things for a few moments before speaking. When she does, it’s resigned. “He wants the throne, and you’re his path to it.”

“Well he can’t fucking have it, can he? I’m over Fenris and his antics. Let’s rip his throat out and be done with all of this nonsense.” Grandfather seethes next to me, red creeping up his neck and coloring his face. I’ve never seen him so angry outside of a battle, and it’s kinda cute that it’s because of me.

“Now, darling. Let’s be reasonable. We can’t kill him for wanting what he can’t have. What we need to be concerned about is his plotting and anyone he might be pulling into it. Treason? A coup? Those are histories I don’t care to repeat. To be honest, it’s exhausting at this point. You’d think they would learn from the many who have failed in the past, but here Fenris is, thinking with his ego and dick and not at all with that pea sized brain inside his rock hard skull.”

“Tell me what you both want me to do about him. I’m leaning towards grandfather’s suggestion,” I smirk knowing damn well there’s no grounds to kill him...yet.

They are both quiet for some time, thinking to themselves. The way their bodies move in unison, their eyes locked together with a sparkle behind them, it seems like they can hear each other's thoughts. Like they are having a private conversation with me sitting between them. It's something I've only witnessed with them and never dared to ask about, but I hope it's real. That kind of connection of souls...that's what I want.

Nodding in unison, grandmother puts down her tea cup with a clank. "Well, it's decided then. You'll keep living your life as is. If he makes any advance on you, come directly to us. Alaric is a good friend to you. Trust him. He'll keep all of us apprised on Fenris's intentions and movements. Until then, you should work on improving your training. I understand you have some weak spots with hand-to-hand combat. It took me a long time to realize the Wolf may not always be there when needed. Sometimes your human form has to fight the battles for you. Remember that and be safe, granddaughter."

"I will. I promise."

That night, I find myself in bed staring at the ceiling once again. Laying amongst my blankets and plush pillows, my own Wolf is just below the surface, growling for release. Something Reika said haunts me and keeps sleep at bay.

How did she know my weakness? And what did she mean the Wolf may not always be there?

CHAPTER 7

ROSE

Dearest Grandma,

I need your guidance. You're the only person I can talk to, and yet you are so far away that I feel you're not really here at all. I feel so alone. So alone. And it hurts deep down in my bones.

Fern got married and moved to her own hut. Bear continues to be a nuisance like most little boys are his age. And mother... well, she's strong as always but stubborn. I suspect she gets that from you.

There's a she-wolf, and she knows about me. But she's dangerous. And I'm dangerous to our people. I'm confused and ashamed and scared.

I found some journal entries in the archives that are the oldest writings I could find. Her name was May, and she tells of a time when the Wolves started to come down on our people and retaliate for things we couldn't control. She said magic is the savior.

Do you know what that means?
Do you know of a way I can
free our people? A way I can
free myself?

Did you hear stories of this
May? What happened to her?

Please write back soon. I need
you.

Your loving granddaughter,
Rose

Folding the letter as small as I can get it, I stuff it inside my shift and hide it in my brassiere. Writing anything is a risk, especially when I'm subject to random searches and a Wolf follows me when I leave the village, but at this point I'm desperate. Grandma is the oldest person I know, so I'm hoping she has some sort of knowledge of May or can at least guide me in the right direction.

Stepping through the apple trees, I pull my red hood over my brown wig and make my way to the forest that potentially contains the She-Wolf I don't want to see. I feel like I lose control of my better judgment when she's too close. My body tingles and my mind goes to more carnal desires that I've never had before, strangely.

Halfway to grandma's with a heavy basket in hand, I reach out with my senses and find her easily. She's keeping herself at a safe distance, thankfully. I don't want to see her. I definitely don't want to talk to her. Curiosity overrides common sense when she's near and for that I hate her. I'm supposed to hate her anyways for being my mortal enemy, even though that's not a path either of us chose. But I really hate her for making me lose myself.

Her kind keep my people poor and beaten down. They harass us, terrorize us, demand goods and services from us, and never relent in their laws that keep us in our place beneath their paws. I don't understand any of it. The note in my bosom scrapes against my skin reminding me of its presence and giving me hope that grandma may have information.

Lost in my thoughts, I arrive at the cliffside and prepare the basket. Quickly, I pull the letter from my chest and place it at the bottom of the goods, hoping the Wolf didn't see. It's not forbidden to communicate with our own kind, but the contents of the letter is something I want to keep between the two of us. Muscles screaming, I race the basket along the pulley system across the ocean below. The wind whips at it, jostling a few apples free, but I manage to move it the final few feet into the window of grandma's hut.

It's been years since I've seen her, only having confirmation that she's still alive by the supply lists and occasional letters she returns in the empty basket. Usually, it's just a list but today I hope for something more.

Loneliness has seeped into me since the Wolf and I had our first interaction, even more so since the flower meadow. Not being able to explain fully to my twin has left me feeling like I'm betraying our bond, like it's not safe even if I trust her with the truth.

After a longer time than usual, the basket makes its way back towards me slowly even though it's empty. Grandma must be feeling more weak today or perhaps she's nearing the end.

Gods, if you can hear me, let there be a letter today. Please, let there be a letter or some word from her other than supplies.

Hope blooms in my chest as the basket crosses the last few feet over the ocean and I reach out to grab it. Searching through the fabric inside, I find a neatly folded piece of parchment. Without hesitation, I unfold it and my heart sinks. It's nothing more than a supply list.

A single tear slips down my cheek, and I turn and make my way back home through the forest that feels so empty today, so lonely. One of the few places I usually find peace now holds nothing but dank, cold silence.

And then I hear her voice. "Why the tears, Red?" It's husky and flat, displaying no emotion.

"Why do you care?" I refuse to look in the direction it's coming from, not wanting to see her, much preferring to be left alone in my melancholy.

"I don't. Just bored, I guess. Since I've been tasked with watching you for months until Gods know how long, might as well talk to you at some point."

"That's probably not wise. The Proctor wouldn't approve."

"Fuck Fenris. He doesn't control me." She sounds angry, and I briefly wonder if there's bad blood between the two of them.

"He might not control you, but he controls me and all of my people. There will be consequences for us if he sees me talking to you."

"Then we shouldn't let him see us talking."

I nod and continue my walk in silence, sensing her following behind me, feeling almost protected knowing she's there. But that's stupid because she knows my secret and she could and should kill me. If anything, she's nothing but danger and delaying my death for her own amusement. That realization causes anger to burn through me.

She's toying with me because she's bored!

Turning around, I stop in the middle of the path, hands on my hips. "You know, I'm tiring of these games you're playing with me. Kill me already and let this be done."

"And why would I do that?" Her voice comes from behind me, much too close for comfort. I never even heard her move.

"We both know why. You're supposed to kill me so get on with it!"

"And what if I don't want to?"

"Then I deserve an explanation, Wolf."

She chuckles deeply, stepping out from behind a tree and into my path, effectively blocking the way to my village. "Funny, little Red, I don't think you're in a position to demand anything from me." Taking measured steps, she stalks towards me with malice and amusement in her golden eyes. "In fact, I think it would be smarter if you do what I tell you to do. Maybe I'll let you keep your pretty Red throat right where it is."

Squaring my shoulders, I stand tall and hold myself up to my full height. Though small, I'm hoping my challenge sends her away. "And what if I turn myself in to the Proctor? I'm sure a quick death will be much more preferred to whatever you have planned in your sick mind."

She closes the remaining space between us, a quick hand reaching out and wrapping long fingers tipped with sharp nails around my throat. "I should rip your throat out, Red."

"Then do it," I whisper in a challenge.

"I should, but I won't. You're dangerous. You know that, right? There's a reason the magick was burned and bled from your kind."

“So they say,” I murmur, completely entranced with her gold eyes staring into mine, the fury burning behind them.

Fingers tighten on my throat, cutting off my air. My vision starts to go black at the edges, and I feel like I’m going to pass out. Fear lances through me. This is not how I want to go. I, at least, want the chance to say goodbye to my family.

Leaning much too close, her nose grazes up the side of my face and a low growl sounds from deep in her chest. “I should rip your fucking throat out right now, Red. I should bleed you dry and burn your corpse.”

In a moment of panic, right before I pass out, my hands instinctively reach up and I clutch onto the bare skin of her forearms. Electric shock jolts through me, through us, and she releases me and throws my nearly unconscious body to the ground.

“What the fuck?” I look up to find her wide-eyed and staring at her arms where I touched her. “What did you do, Red?”

“N-nothing,” I gasp out through my tender throat, sucking air back into my lungs like tiny knives ripping through my abused flesh.

A deeper, angry growl tears through her body, the edges of her form shimmering. Her Wolf is trying to break through, and I fear her self control is waning. This is it. She’s going to kill me.

“I hate you! I hate everything about you! Your blood begs to coat my throat.” Wolf teeth grow before my eyes, the edges of her form turning black as her muscles expand and her body cracks loudly. Suddenly, her head snaps to the side, her attention drawn away from me and into the forest. “Perhaps another day, Red.”

And she turns and leaves me in the dirt, stunned and wondering what the feck just happened.

CHAPTER 8

SAMIRA

“Motherfucker!” I grumble to myself as I shift and race to intercept Fenris. In my Wolf form, I hear and smell him much closer than my human form did. Irritated and furious from the encounter I just had with that Godsdamned Red, I decide to let off some steam.

Stepping behind a large tree, I wait for him to approach, gauging my next move for just the right moment to take him off guard. His senses are nowhere as sensitive as my own. Fenris isn’t an alpha and I know I am. Everyone knows I am, it’s just not a responsibility I want to take on. He, on the other paw, is a beta who aspires to be an alpha. Something he can never be. It’s a born right, not a learned one. Desire be damned.

His stench on the wind announces his approach well in advance. Something like rotting meat and piss permeates my nose. Crouching down, I make myself as low to the ground as possible, and the idiot passes right by me in a direct path towards the Red.

Mine! If anyone is going to kill her, it’s going to be me.

Stepping out, I trot up behind Fenris and bark obnoxiously.

“Shit!” He jumps and spins on me, bracing for a fight before he sees it’s me. “Oh, it’s just you. You got the jump on me. It seems your stealth skills have improved since the last time we ran drills together.”

“It seems so,” I smirk, all cockiness and bravado on display. “What are you doing here, Fenris? You’re much too close to the Reds’ territory, and it’s not inspection time.”

“Just, uh—”

I cut him off. “And you’re a terrible liar. The truth, Fenris.”

“I was out for a walk. That’s all.”

Staring him down, I’m silent for an uncomfortable amount of time, letting him stew in his terrible lie.

“Okay, fine. I was checking up on you.”

“And why would I need you to check up on me, exactly?”

“You’ve been acting off. Figured it might have something to do with the Red you’re tasked with watching every week.”

“Or it could be that I’m annoyed with weak Wolves who think they can break and own me? Ever think of that?”

His muzzle clenches together and eyes narrow as he assesses me, contemplating his next words. Puffing up his chest, he paces around me, making me turn in a circle. I realize what he’s doing. He’s trying to get me to turn my back to him. Fortunately, I’m not ignorant nor do I feel like having a physical battle with a weak male who’s thinking with his dick.

We circle each other for a long time. Me waiting on him to speak or make the first move. Him assessing and working over the possibilities in his tiny, insufficient brain. Finally, he’s the first to break the standoff.

“You know, Samira, we could be great together. I’m the largest, most physically powerful male in the pack. You’re the next in line for the Alpha title. We could rule the pack together. Have all of the power, all of the control. Wipe those fucking cursed Reds off the continent entirely. Imagine a Cordova with no Reds at all. Wolves would rule and prosper. We would once again be the great ones that our histories tell us we were.”

I realized he wanted the Alpha title, but to kill off an entire civilization of people? No. That’s not a world I ever want to live in.

“Fenris, your ideas are shortsighted and laced with fear and stupidity. Don’t you think if we’d be better off with no Reds existing here that our current Alphas would have already done it? Don’t you think there might be a bigger picture for our coexisting? There are children in that village. We’ve already taken away their magick. You want to kill innocents and children, too? Hasn’t there been enough of that to last hundreds of lifetimes?”

“They’re a disease. A pest! I see them in their homes, in their daily lives, and what do they do but merely exist. They offer nothing to us that we can’t get for ourselves. They serve no purpose.”

“To you. They serve no purpose to you. It’s a good thing your opinion doesn’t matter, Fenris, for you’re a weak minded, cruel Wolf, and I want nothing to do with you.”

I turn to walk away from him and instantly realize my mistake, but it’s a second too late. Fenris uses the opportunity to pounce, sinking his teeth into my hindquarter for a brief moment. It doesn’t hurt, but that’s his intention.

“Don’t turn your back to me, Samira. I’ve lived much longer than you, young one. I see the parasites for what they are. You’re blinded by, what? Care? Do you care now for that fragile, tiny Red you’re forced to watch?”

I try to school my reaction but shock and anger clearly show in my eyes.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You care for her!” He lets out a loud, barking laugh.

“You’re just as dumb as you look. I hate them! All of them, especially her!”

“So let’s rip her throat out together and feast on her corpse. A little snack to warm up to the big show.”

“There will be no snack or big show. Don’t touch her or them. I fucking mean it! If you so much as look at any of them wrong I’ll kill you and wear your fur to keep me warm during the frozen season. Better yet, I’ll give it to the Reds. Perhaps they like the smell of piss.” Giving him a sniff, I turn up my nose in disgust and back away a few steps. “Really, Fenris. It’s no wonder no female wants to bed you.”

Those words are what finally does it. Baring his teeth, Fenris lunges for my throat, fury in his eyes. He means to end me, and it's exactly what I expected from such a pathetic Wolf. Dodging to the side, I easily jump out of the way. He's much, much bigger than me, but what he doesn't realize is I have the advantage.

I'm faster, less encumbered by size, and smarter. I know these woods like I know the makeup of my own body. Turning and running back towards the pack, I do exactly what I planned on. I lead him away from the Red and make him focus his anger on me instead.

Fear is the last thing on my mind as I dodge through trees and vines, brambles and boulders. I can feel him getting close, the ground shaking with his steps, but reaching deep down inside of myself I summon every ounce of energy I have and a burst of speed explodes from me.

Chuckling, I taunt him to keep his attention.

"Didn't think a small girl could outrun you, did you? Fenris the big," I laugh. "Seems more like Fenris the tiny dicked, overcompensator. Maybe that's why no female wants to mate with you."

A furious growl sounds behind me, still close but the distance is more to my liking. "Bitch! I will rip out your throat!"

"Awwww, did I hurt your feelings, tiny dick? Don't worry. I'm sure no one else realizes you're trying too hard."

"I'll feast on your heart, girl!"

"You'd have to catch me, first, beta!"

Close to home, I can hear my grandmother in my head. It's more like a hum of energy in the background of my thoughts. Throwing up my mental wall at Fenris, I mentally reach down the glowing line that connects us and alert her to the problem close on my heels. We can't communicate in words, exactly. It's more like feelings, so I throw at her fear, anger, danger, anything I can think of to get my point across.

Just a few hundred yards of forest to go and my energy burst is draining. Fenris is gaining on me in long strides, crashing through thorns and vines

like they're nothing. I've really pissed him off.

Good. Well, so long as he doesn't catch me.

It's not fear that drives the muscles in my legs to run away from him. Common sense is the prevailing feature at the moment. He's bigger, furious, better trained in combat, and has nothing to lose but everything to gain by eating the heart of an alpha. If he kills me, he has a chance to challenge the Alpha, and he'll be empowered by my life force. There are other ways to go about challenging the true Alpha, but this seems to be the smartest way to go about it for a weaker Wolf like him.

A few things click into place upon that revelation. Things I push out of my mind and will address later. For now, I see the break in the trees ahead of me and race towards them. Jaws snap at my hindquarters, coming much too close to sinking into me and coming away with a mouth of fur.

Finally and thankfully, I reach home and burst through the trees almost running head first into Alaric. Turning quickly in the dirt, I take my place next to him and face down Fenris, fury and bloodlust raging through me.

He comes to a sliding stop in the dirt and stares me down, murder in his eyes.

"Fenris! What is the meaning of this?" Fayez, the greatest warrior in our village, stands on my other side at his full height, towering over Fenris.

"That bitch talks too much and I plan on shutting her mouth permanently," he snarls, never taking his eyes off me. "I'm well within my right to challenge her."

"You are well within your right to challenge anyone you wish, but I'd reconsider the repercussions of your actions." Aunt Daciana steps forward from the line of Wolves and stalks toward him.

Side-eyeing her, he still doesn't turn his full attention from me. White fur and black eyes sidle up next to him, her bared teeth inches from his neck.

"Think about it, Fenris. Say you challenge the Alpha's granddaughter and you win, which is highly unlikely, but let's pretend you stand a chance against her. Samira is dead, you've eaten her heart, and then what? You

challenge the Alpha?” The entire line of Wolves laughs at him under their breath causing his fury to cool a bit. “Do you think you really stand a chance against her?”

He’s silent.

“Oh, you do.” Daciana tsks at him in pity. “You’ve always been a fool, but I didn’t think you had a death wish. You don’t stand a chance against the Alpha, but let’s pretend once again that you win. Do you really think any of us will let you rule over us? We would rip you to shreds before you took one bite of her heart and assumed control. This pack will never answer to you, Fenris. Laws be damned. We choose who to follow, and we have spoken.”

In unison, the entire line of Wolves lower their heads and bare their fangs at him, deep growls reverberating through our chests. My fury is barely contained, and I join my pack in the promise of death that will come if he makes one wrong move.

Refusing to budge, he bares his fangs and growls in return, saliva foaming and dripping from his mouth like a rabid animal. One that I now realize will need to be put down at some point. For now, I wait for him to make the move. I’ll fight him if he chooses that path, and I’ll win. I don’t relish the thought of killing anyone, but I’ll gladly rip his throat out and eat his fucking heart for threatening me, my pack, and the Red.

No one moves for the longest time, until finally his fury seems to dim from a boil to a simmer and he retracts his fangs and takes a step back. Standing up to his full height, he looks down at me and snorts.

“Another time, then, eh Samira?”

I bark and snap at him in warning. “Fucking look forward to it.”

And he turns and walks away.

Still furious, I don’t move, frozen in place at the realization of how close it came to a fight with some asshole who only wants me for my heart. My literal heart in my chest.

White fur comes into my periphery and nudges me under the chin, shaking me out of my thoughts.

“What’d you do to piss him off?”

“Told him he stunk and had a little dick.”

Aunt Daciana lets out a loud laugh, drawing the attention of the rest of the line of warriors. “Well, that’ll do it for someone like him. You know he’s going to be a serious problem now, right? This isn’t over.”

“I’m counting on it,” I murmur. “I need drinks. Who’s coming?”

“Here, here!” someone along the line shouts, followed by raucous laughter.

Hours and many drinks later, I’m taken home on the shoulder of my Aunt and tossed into bed.

“What a fucked up day,” I mumble before quickly falling to sleep and being sucked into nightmares of red hair laying in the dirt with her throat ripped out, Fenris standing over her corpse.

CHAPTER 9

ROSE

Today is a day that I fear I'll be a victim to the forest alongside all of those souls. The Wolf haunted me in my dreams last night and still does though I'm awake. Her eyes, her smell, her growl, the feeling of her tongue on my face. I can't escape her. Just like I can't escape the fear and emotions plaguing me, fully knowing she'll be hiding and watching me along my journey.

So many emotions I'm unable to name swirl through me in an unyielding storm.

Excitement?

No, that's stupid. No one would be excited at being stalked by imminent death. She knows my secret. It's only a matter of time, and time is something I don't have. Not anymore.

Anticipation?

Am I anticipating my death or our next meeting? A tingle between my legs draws my attention in an uncommon and abrupt interruption of my thoughts.

Lust?

I quickly dismiss that thought. It's stupid to think I could be lusting after a creature who's born hating my people and bound by duty to kill those of us just like me. But still...the tingling persists as I'm lost in my head remembering the way it felt with her Wolf above me. I wonder what it would be like for her human form to be above me and quickly, shamefully, dismiss that thought.

A memory assaults me of pressure around my throat cutting off my air as her fingers squeezed, her nose grazing up the side of my face, the promise of her teeth sinking into me and then the fear of her actually doing it. The feel of her powerful forearms in my hands just as I was about to pass out, and then confusion at the electric shock I produced to protect myself.

But how did I do that?

Reaching up I touch my throat, still tender from yesterday, and smile a little. And that gives me pause. Why am I smiling at someone hurting me and almost killing me? No. Not just someone. The She-Wolf.

And then last night, I woke to something I don't know how to name. It wasn't visible, but more of a feeling. A hum in my blood. My heart reached a crescendo of panic the louder the hum became, and I dashed from my family's hut down to the river to find peace or solace or anything to stop the noise inside of my body.

Water rippled by in an angry torrent from the recent rainstorms, beckoning me forward to silence the hum that had moved through my body and reached my brain at a deafening volume. I don't know what I was thinking other than I needed it to stop, but before I could control myself I walked into the rough water and sank below the surface.

Something happened then. Something I can't logically explain out loud. Beneath the surface, I felt my body being pulled downstream but then it stopped. It stopped, and it was like I became the current. Like I became the sand beneath my feet. Like I could hear the fish swimming by and feel the moons slumbering in the sky. It was like I was finally free of some pressure within my heart and mind I didn't realize had been there my entire life until it was gone.

Holding my hands out in the water, I moved them with intention and the current obeyed as it lessened and then stilled. I thought I was dead for a few minutes until I surfaced and stood on the shore watching the silent, quiet water waiting for me.

It was then that I knew my power had manifested, and I am probably the only Red alive with magick thrumming in my body. And I've felt sheer terror and panic ever since.

Will she know something is different the next time she's near me? Can the rest of them sense it? Can my own people sense that I'm not the same?

Now, I'm faced with my task of moving through Wolf territory with a curious, intrusive stalker. There's no one for me to talk to. No guide to help me control my magick and blend in like before. What if she gets too close? Will my instincts kick in and my magick reach out to protect me again?

If I can't control it, we're all doomed. The fate of many rests in the hands of me, a small insignificant nobody in a village full of ancestors of the once mighty but many fallen people of magick. I take a shaky step outside of the safety of my village and into the unknown, praying to whatever Gods who want to listen that I'm not damning every remaining Red to a painful death.



It's time to take the journey through the forest to my grandma's isolated island to deliver her much needed supplies. Her notes along with her supply lists have become desperate and strange, like she's trying to find her own cure, but we all know the shedding disease is a death sentence. Our oral stories tell of people before my grandma's time who had the disease and wandered off into the mountains to die a lonely and very painful death. Some were able to stave it off for a few years, but in the end they all walked out of the village to never return.

The recent rains have made a hazy overcast glow in the forest. Sunlight tries to peek through the canopy, only to be transformed into an ethereal kind of fog that glows off of the flora. Frogs and other insects sing while small animals skitter around, interrupting my silent terror and drawing my attention to them.

What must it be like to be able to live your life for the purpose you were created? Staring at a bluebird flitting from branch to branch, I wish we would switch places and I could feel that level of freedom in my own skin, if only for a brief time.

I wonder if she's watching me already. Usually I can sense her, but since my magick has manifested I'm scared to even try.

There's a plant on the way to grandma's island that she requested in her last supply list. Strict instructions were given of how to cut it and store it for the journey. She's trying to cure herself, a feat that's never been done, but if anyone can do it, she can.

Hope threatens to seep into my heart, but I clamp down the feeling and shield it off. "In a world like ours, Reds should never hope. We should only learn and move forward. Be happy in the present," my mother always says, "for if you allow yourself to dream of better things you'll be disappointed. This is our life. We should cherish being allowed to have it."

And that's exactly what I repeat to myself as I step off the path in search of the elusive purple plant with gray leaves grandma wants. Lycanius mortem, the Wolf killer. It doesn't actually kill Wolves unless they consume it in large quantities, but it does make them very sick. What she could want with that plant, I have no idea.

Wildflowers in shades of purple, blue, pink, and yellow grow in a massive patch in a clearing ahead of me. The lycanius mortem tends to grow at the very base of the rare red wildflower. The blood flower. I haven't seen one in years, but today feels different. The ground beneath me feels different, like I'm able to zone in on the exact red petals I need.

Knowingness tingles through my feet, up the back of my legs, up my back, twists around my spine and finally shoots into my brain. The ground beneath my feet has shown me the way, and curiously I follow the

directions that lead me beyond the wildflower patch I was headed to and off into the darkness of the woods on the other side.

Just a little farther, something says inside my head, but before I can assess the new voice something else draws my attention. Pine, juniper, and a light mix of honeysuckle and blood invade my nostrils.

It's her. Fuck! It's her!

Panic threatens to overtake me as my limbs tremble and my heart rate picks up. She can hear it, I know, but I'm unable to contain it. My control slips and I allow myself to use my power to find grandma's plant, and she's here watching, absorbing, assessing.

Can she feel my magick? Hell, can she hear my magick? Does it thrum through me and around me like it feels like it does? Can she sense the vortex of power inside of me like I can? Have I just signed my own death notice?

Images fill my mind in a daydream of terror like a waking nightmare come to reality. The look in my mother's eyes when she gets the note. The ensuing execution team that comes to kill my family and anyone else that hid my secret fills my vision.

I stop walking, unable to make my feet move anymore. Pressure builds in my chest, my brain. Screaming. There's screaming. Is that me or my waking nightmare? Can she hear it, too?

Before I'm able to stop myself, I shout in the direction I feel her. "I know you're there! No need to stalk me. Come out and say your piece, Wolf."

A grumble comes from behind a copse of trees, and I fight to suppress a giggle. It's official. I've lost my fucking mind. But I'm not scared because it sounds more like annoyance rather than anger. The large black beast steps out from behind the trees and slowly stalks toward me, head down and gold eyes trained on me. She looks menacing, and I should be afraid, but I'm not. Something came along with my power and it's calling my name, seeping into my bones and deep down into my marrow.

Bravery.

For the first time in my life, I'm not afraid to be a Red hiding red hair. I'm not afraid at all. Power crackles through my body, hopefully imperceptible to the She-Wolf stalking closer by the moment, but obnoxiously distracting to me. Edges of bright white light and gold streaks tingle in my brain, on the edges of my vision.

Inhaling deeply and exhaling my tension, the power ebbs to a more manageable level just as she stops a few feet away from me and angles her head in amusement and silent questioning.

"Don't trust me to shift so we can talk?"

She answers me with silence.

"Okay, then. Look, I'm headed to my grandma's just as I've been doing for years. I'm wearing the red cloak as the treaty demands. You following me, watching me, well—" I swallow deeply and reach for courage. "Well, it's uncalled for. You chased me and made me fall and stood over me like a damned brute. And then in the valley opposite the river...what the feck was that? Don't touch. Isn't that your kinds' rule? Shift and talk to me. I have questions that I deserve an answer to, She-Wolf."

Cunning gold eyes roll back in the head of the stalking menace, and then she turns and walks towards some trees. Walking around the side, she's only out of view for a few seconds before she reappears on the other side completely naked. Long dark hair shiny like the finest silk cascades down her breasts to her hips. Skin of fresh fawn, cool and muted with a slight golden undertone, warms and seems to brighten under my gaze, like she's an ethereal creature of the forest rather than a woman standing before me.

One hand covering her pussy, the other on her hip that is cocked out in a stance that only says annoyance, she finally speaks. And when she does, that husky voice draws me in like she's calling me to my death. There could be a cliff in front of me and I'd gladly walk off it with that damned voice distracting me.

"So, here I am. What now?"

I'm staring at her breasts, the curve underneath, the teardrop shape that makes me want to cry. I want to touch her, to see her nipples, to taste them

in my mouth—

Stop it! She's the enemy! I yell at myself inside my head, doing my best to control my features on the outside.

Clearing my throat, I attempt to speak but my own voice comes out in a haze of lust. “Do you think you could put some clothes on? Kinda hard to talk to you when I can’t even look at you.”

She steps one single, excruciating, invading foot forward, coming within the bubble of my personal space and comfort area.

“I would, but it seems I don’t have any. Perhaps you might have something for me to wear.”

“No. I’m sorry. This is the only shift I have.”

“Pity,” she smirks like she’s enjoying this. “I guess I’ll have to remain bare then. Tell me what you want and I’ll be gone.”

“I want—” *you to lick me again.* I clear my throat and push the errant thought away. “I want you to stop following me. Stop harassing me. And most definitely stop coming into my personal space. You’re not supposed to touch me, right? And yet you’ve touched me on three separate occasions. It seems you can’t even follow the rules your own kind have made.”

Her complexion grows slightly darker with annoyance, reminiscent of her Wolf, but she grits her teeth and refuses to soften. “You’re lying, Red one. You’re lying to yourself and everyone else, and I know your secret.”

Fury rushes through me, and I’m unable to control it. Electricity crackles between my fingers, drawing her attention. “And what of it? You should have done your duty already, so let’s get on with it. Kill me or feck off already.”

Her jaw clenches and eyes narrow in suspicion, the gold glinting behind the beautiful brown that is drawing me into their pools. But she refuses to speak. Her hands ball into fists at her sides, the dark triangle of hair between her thighs now exposed and drawing my attention.

A smirk flashes across her lips and disappears quickly before I'm able to decipher if it was an illusion. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

"So what do you want?"

Quietly, she stares at me, carefully choosing her next words. "I want to make sure you're not a threat. Let's call this, whatever the fuck this is, curiosity."

"Curiosity?" I scoff, no longer caring that she could kill me in an instant if she chose to. "I'm fully within the treaty. I'm within my rights under the law your kind has put upon us and still you follow me the moment I step out of my village. Not only are we subject to inspections and harassment in our homes but one step into the forest and here you are interrupting my peace."

I feel the power sizzling between my fingers again, pulsing like the anger in my veins, and am unable to rein it in.

"Hmmm." The She-Wolf assesses me, her eyes running up and down my body. "Seems you've found something, little Red. Seems my curiosity was not misplaced," she growls, her fangs growing before my eyes.

Ice chills my skin and floods my veins. Shivers rack my body, quickly replacing any sense of anger or power that I thought I had a right to.

"Don't," I whisper, throat tight, tears welling in my eyes and threatening to spill over. "Please." I dare to look at her, really look at her, scared of what I might find there now that she knows I have magick in my veins.

Careful steps close the distance between us, her jaw clenching tighter and flexing with every step. She's shaking by the time she's within arms reach of me, more of a mirage of a woman with the muted form of a Wolf surrounding the edges of her body. Holding onto her control, but just barely, she reaches a hand out, her rough palm making contact with my cheek.

My body isn't mine. Self-control no longer exists and I lean into her touch, eyes closed, and breathe deeply of her scent. It soothes me, calms my spirit and my magick, lulls me into safety and security. No matter how false it may be...

“I could never kill you, my little Red. Never.”

“Why?” I choke out, tears escaping and leaking down my cheek onto her palm.

“Because you’re not a monster. You’re not a disease, not dangerous, not wrong.”

I dare to open my eyes and look up into hers. There I find the She-Wolf full of emotion and turmoil with her own tears welling up as she looks down on me. “Then what am I?”

“Mine!” she growls.

Ripping her warm touch from my face, she turns and runs off into the forest, her shape changing before my eyes into the black Wolf I’ve come to know as my shadow.

Hers...

CHAPTER 10

SAMIRA

I touched her. I fucking touched her again. Godsdamnit, I am so fucking weak!

Running as fast as my legs can push me, I barrel through the brush. Limbs slap my face and pull at my fur, but I keep running.

The mountains will have an answer for me. Surely, the mountains can help me make sense of this madness. Three moons will light the sky tonight. Not quite full, I still hope there's enough power contained in them for me to be able to hear them speaking. I'm lost. I'm so fucking lost and at odds with myself and my nature that I don't know what to do.

I want her. I need her. I need to taste her, to smell her, to feel her. I need to sink my teeth into her perfect flesh and hear her whimper underneath me as I rut into her.

Just thinking about it has my pussy aching painfully. What would it feel like to have my mouth on her perfect, small body? What would it feel like to have her straddling me with my face buried into her beautiful red hair cascading down her body in waves?

Shaking my head, I chastise myself for daring to want, daring to taste that which is completely forbidden in my pack. They could kill me for my thoughts alone.

Fuck! Can someone hear me right now?

Reaching out my senses, I search for a Wolf close enough to hear the voice screaming in my head but find silence, and I'm grateful for the loneliness.

Treacherous rocks jut out in front of me and dare me to climb them. There are easier ways to get to the top of the mountains, but today feels like one of those times that I need to take the hard way. I need to feel my muscles straining, feel the sweat drip down my back, want to give up and keep pushing myself on. Life is a series of feats to overcome, and I need this to be one of those challenges.

What feels like hours pass as I focus my mind on climbing higher and higher. Rocks stab into my paws and lacerate the tissue there. Blood seeps from me into the ground, and it comforts me, like I'm a part of this place just like she is. Like she can feel me even though we aren't so far from each other that I feel a loss.

No! Stop it!

I can't afford to think that way. She's the most forbidden fruit, something that will sign my death scroll. I can't. I won't.

My shoulders ache and the muscles in my back haunches shake with exhaustion. I'm almost there. Just a few more outcroppings. Just a little longer. I can do it. I must do it!

Allowing myself to zone out and ignore the pain for a short time, I think of the only thing that calms my animal mind lately. Her taste. Memories of my Wolf tongue reaching out and licking up the side of her face haunt me, entice me, arouse me. Gods, I want it again. I want to run my tongue up the entire length of her body and taste the essence that is my little Red darling. My female Wolf parts begin to tingle, something I've never encountered before, just as I take the last hard step up and arrive on the flat ground at the top of the mountain.

The sun has sunk below the horizon of the ocean, and the moons shine above me in near fullness, knowing and judging. Without hesitation, I bow before them, sinking my snout between my paws and touching the dirt.

Rising, I shift back to my human form with no effort and stand completely naked beneath the bright gleams of the three orbs in the sky. Illuminated in light, bathed in nocturnal power, I feel seen and alive.

“What should I do?” I yell, but there’s no reply.

“Should I kill her?” Only my own question echoes back at me.

“Should I let her go? Never see her again?” Silence greets me again.

The Gods aren’t listening tonight. They don’t care about my trivial problems or twisted emotions. Silence answers me from the sky of which I’ve prayed to, stood before in my Wolf and human form, sacrificed my blood for. And I’m so utterly defeated and lonely.

But then, a thought occurs to me. Am I asking the wrong question?

Swallowing thickly, I ask that which is most forbidden, that which I could be excommunicated or put to death for. “Should I fuck her? Should I risk loving her?”

It begins as a deep rumble and rises to a deafening level. Clouds roll in and gradually cover the moons. Sizzling starts between the ominous grays and then it happens.

My answer shoots down into the ground a few feet from me. Close enough to burn me, I’m spared but for a tingle throughout my body and the answer to my question coursing through the fibers of my muscles, the blood in my veins, the Wolf in my soul.

Yes.



Stretching out in my bed, I flex my toes and fingers, taking a silent assessment of my body. Everything feels the same...but not. Something has shifted. Something feels different.

Sitting up in a motion more swift than I've ever done in the past, I throw my legs over the side of my bed and touch my feet to the floor. Fiber by fiber, I feel the wood underneath my toes, holding me and supporting me though it's been torn from the ground and turned into something I've walked on every day since I was a toddler.

Shock and fear assault my senses. *I can feel the flooring? Really feel it? What the fuck did that lightning do to me?*

Quickly, I rush into my bathroom and step inside my massive wash basin. The cold water should fix this. It has to. But turning on the water and holding myself under the tap, I realize how wrong I am. Every drip feels like too much movement, like it's too loud.

"Oh, fuck! What is this?" It's all too much. Rushing back to my bed, I dive underneath the covers, soaked and not caring that I'm drenching my linens. Linens that I'm now able to zone in on every single fiber, every stitch.

My head! Fuck! My head screams in protest against the assault. Too much. Too much. Chest tightening to an unbearable level, I'm convinced I've committed the worst kind of sin and the moons are now punishing me.

I'm going to die. Alone.

Air hitches in and out of my lungs as I clutch my chest. Everything is hard. Breathing, my heart beating, keeping my eyes open. Flinging off the covers, I lay on my back, splayed out and stare at the beams on my ceiling while tears leak from my eyes and track down the side of my head only to be lost in my hair.

Darkness seeps into my vision as I inhale a few more breaths with all of the strength I'm able to muster. And then it overtakes me, and I'm gone.



right light, brown hair, green eyes, and the sweetest of flowers invade the blackness that is my death.

BI've died and gone off to the next plane. My body is gone. I can't feel it anymore.

But her face. Her beautiful face crackling with power beneath the surface, barely containing her anger, gazes down at me.

Trying to speak, my mouth refuses to move. "Are you my prize?" I think to myself.

A rude scoff answers me followed by rustling nearby.

"How long has she been like this?" an unfamiliar woman's voice asks.

"Five days," Reika answers somberly.

The woman clucks in admonishment at her, at the Alpha. "You should have called on me sooner."

"We followed the advice of our own people, first. They said it was probably just a fever and she would come out of it on her own." Rikon sounds more concerned than I've ever heard him. Guilt eats at me, and I want to protect him, to stand up for him. But I'm frozen.

"This is more than a fever. I've never seen this for myself, but I've read about it. It's of the Gods, not of man or land." The woman is blunt, not unkind, but not letting them down softly, either. "She will require constant care. Tell me, how does this one get her sustenance? Human form? Wolf form? Both?"

"Both," they answer in unison.

"Good. That makes it less complicated. My other daughter and her husband are out looking for herbs and plants that we need. Tell your people not to harass them. They wear the red capes."

"Done. What else do you need?" Reika's voice shakes with a nervousness that I've never heard from my grandmother or my Alpha.

A small shuffling moves closer, followed by whispering. "Mother, let me."

That voice! It's her! She's really here! Wait. She's here?!

Fear consumes me, ratcheting up my body and sending me into uncontrollable quakes.

“Samira!” A large, warm hand grips mine, but I’m not able to return the gesture. The only thing I can do is remain stuck in this body that has become foreign to me while it convulses.

“Reika, stand back!” the woman demands. Just as quickly, the warm hand is gone. “Rose, grab the cool rags while I work on stripping her clothing. You two may want to avert your eyes and allow her a bit of privacy in her indecency.”

Feet shuffle just as I become aware of hands working quickly all over my body. It’s cold. I’m cold. The vicious shaking of my body lessens bit by bit and turns into shivers.

More feet shuffle and the door clicks shut behind them, leaving me in terrifying silence, locked in a body I can’t control. Unable to move or speak or open my eyes, I feel on the cusp of madness and then it happens.

A small warm hand cups my cheek, her scent enveloping me, invading me, wrapping me in a blanket of comfort and calming me.

“Shhhhhh. Relax and breathe. Breathe deep, Samira.”

And I do just that. I breathe her in and exhale my panic and fear. I wish I could see her face. I wish I could touch her back. I wish I could tell her how much her being here comforts me. I wish I could hear my name on her lips again, over and over, for the rest of my life.

My enemy. My sworn enemy at my bedside in my time of need comforting me seems like nothing more than a sick joke my mind is playing on me. She’s in so much danger being here, but she’s here. Her mother could have brought her sister or her little brother, but Rose is here. That has to mean something.

Rose. Just the thought of her name brings me comfort. Rose.

The door opens briefly and a single pair of feet walk back inside.

“Rose, are you absolutely sure? You know the risk this puts you in, puts us all in.”

“Mother, you couldn’t make me leave if you tried. I’m staying until she’s healed. It’s important, not just for her or for me. It’s important for our people that we show this solidarity in their time of great need. She’s the granddaughter of the Alphas, an heir to the throne possibly. I have to stay. You’re needed at home with father and Bear. Our people need you, too. No one will miss me, and the Wolves will never suspect me. I’m not a threat. It’s the only solution.”

“If you’re sure then—”

“I am.” And she sounds it. Completely unmovable in her decision to put her life in danger by sleeping with the Wolves who would kill her without a single thought if they knew the truth.

“Okay, then. Fern or Bear will be ‘round with supplies. Isolate her. Keep everyone away that you can. We don’t know if she’ll come out of this a shell of her former self or something else, something the Gods created. That is, if she lives at all.”

“I know, mother. Trust me to do what’s necessary. And don’t send Bear. He’s too young and full of mischief to test the patience of Wolves.”

“Come home to me, Rose.”

“I will, mother,” she whispers, muffled in what must be an embrace. “See you soon.”

A few moments later, the door clicks shut and I’m left alone with what is supposed to be my greatest enemy and threat, but also my biggest temptation into damnation.

CHAPTER II

ROSE

A week has passed with no movement from Samira. At least the convulsions have stopped and the fevers have lessened a bit. Fern has been by twice to bring me food and supplies. My days consist of cleaning her body and applying salves and herbs to her exposed skin, forcing bone broths and blood down her throat, and reading. Always reading.

Mother said she's read about Samira's condition, so I had Fern bring me any writings, scrolls, books, and journal entries they could find. There are only a handful with the briefest of mentions. The Wolves haven't had a true healer in generations, but Reika sends members of her Guard with anything they can find in their library they think may help.

A young man called Alaric brought me the latest book yesterday. While his face was kind, there was pain and concern hidden behind his eyes.

"H-how is she?" He looked down at his feet, not daring to meet my eyes. Some of them still believe in the legends and lies which tell of Reds stealing Wolf souls if you look directly at them. If the situation wasn't so serious, I may have laughed.

"Same." I didn't dare speak to him at length, my role still tightly in place.

"Can I do anything to help her?"

“No. Stay far away. Dangerous.” While he refused to look at me, I assessed him with jealous eyes. His care for her was more than one of a friend. Unable to tell just how much, if any, reciprocation there was for his feelings, the thought of anyone touching her brought an unexpected possessiveness to the forefront causing my fingertips to sizzle under the flesh. I have no claim to this woman. Hell, she could still kill me when she comes out of this affliction.

Lucky for Alaric, he chose the wise path and left quickly.

Surrounded by books, I’m sitting on a plush leather chair in front of the roaring fireplace searching for an answer. Any answer. The most I’ve been able to decipher is she’s going through some sort of metamorphosis similar to something my ancestors would have gone through.

Most of the books talk about my people as a disease or scourge upon the Wolves, but there are a few notes here and there that seem to be written by the reader, not the author. Within these notes I’ve found something.

Hope.

We aren’t so different, the Wolves and Reds. A long time ago we lived in harmony, interbreeding, loving each other, neighbors not enemies. The magick that surged through those of us lucky to be born with red hair also surged through a few Wolves. There’s nothing written that tells me who was magicked or why, but it seems that the chosen ones were either ripped apart by insanity or developed some sort of gift.

But that’s where it ends. A “gift.” Pages are ripped out of the books, leaving me with only more questions.

Samira’s body is thinner, paler, but still there’s a strong life force buried in there. Something inside of me is pulling towards her with every passing hour, and it’s becoming so hard to resist the beckoning.

I’ve tried everything to heal her. Well, almost everything, and I’m getting desperate. I want to take her to the river, my river, their river. The place that provides life to us all. The water, the ground, nature, it all calls to me to bring her home, but she’s not mine to take.

She’s not mine...

Why does that hurt so deeply?



“It’s been two weeks, Rose. It’s time to switch out and let me take over.”

“No. End of discussion.”

“Rose,” her voice is soft, comforting, “if she was going to come out of this she would have done it already. Let me stay with her for the remainder or turn her over to her own kind. There’s nothing more we can do.”

But there is something more I can do. I can try. Mother doesn’t know what happened to me in the river. The thought of someone torturing her for knowing my full truth about who and what I am—

No. I can’t do it. I mustn’t do it. But am I doing more harm by keeping it from her?

“Mother, I need you to help me. I want to try one more thing, just one more, but you have to talk to the Alphas and convince them to let us take her alone.”

“Take her?” Her voice is high pitched and alarmed. “Where could we possibly take her?”

“I need you to trust me, mother. It’s too dangerous for you to know. Please, please, please, just trust me.”

“Rose Briar Riverbourne, you listen to me. I am your mother. You will not hide things from me no matter how noble you think you’re being in protecting us from the truth. Tell me now. I have a right to know whatever it is you’re hiding and decide for myself what to feel about it.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. If it were me, I’d want to know. I’d demand to know. It feels more like a betrayal keeping it from her with all she’s done for me, so I take a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“Mother, I’ve been blessed with magick by the river.”

Silence follows. Silence and ice shooting through my veins. Mother’s eyes are round and almost bulging from her head.

“It can’t be,” she whispers. “They killed the magick out of the land, out of us. It can’t be.”

“It is and I have it. I feel it in my veins, my tissues. I feel it in every fiber of my body all the time like a low crackle. I don’t know what it means or what kind of magick is inside of me, but I feel it telling me to bring her to the river. Maybe I can heal her or maybe I’ll kill her. Either way, I can’t ignore it any longer.” Gritting my teeth, I choke back tears and will my voice to sound powerful, just like I feel. “Now, mother, will you help me?”

Tears spill out of her eyes and track down her face, leaving wet droplets in the fabric on the bosom of her shift. She’s scared, but she’s something else too. Proud?

“My daughter has magick,” she whispers. “My daughter has magick,” she repeats more firmly and a big smile spreads across her face.

Saliva thickens in my throat and I struggle to find my voice. “I’m sorry for keeping it from you for so long. I thought I was protecting you.”

“Don’t you apologize to me, my most powerful gift. And yes, I’ll help you convince them. If only you could magick me some courage. That Alpha is a right nasty bitch when she’s upset.”

I chuckle nervously. “That she is, but she’s also wise. I’m sure you can convince her it’s in their best interest to let us take her. No one has to know where we’re going. Tell them she’s nearing the end and we should take her further away for an isolated death to protect the pack.”

Biting her nails, mother contemplates my plan. “Yes, yes. That might work. We’ll need to take her during daylight the day of the full moons. Most of the Wolves will be resting up for that night. A supply delivery will provide us with the horse. I’ll have your sister bring the covered carriage instead of the open wagon this time.” She paces the room, tapping her fingernails on her teeth now, her eyes shooting back and forth as she works our plan over in her mind. “Yes. This will work.”

“Good. Because the full moons are in two days.”



A pained howl echoes through the forest, signaling my mother has given the Alphas the terrible news of Samira’s possible contagion and imminent passing. Still, I wait for what feels like hours for my mother to return.

Finally, the door to Samira’s cabin creaks open and mother’s wary face appears.

“It’s done. That was much harder than I expected. The pain on their faces—” she shudders involuntarily, “--that’s something I’ll never forget.”

“Pain is only temporary. It’ll all be worth it when I heal her and she returns to them.”

“You’re sure you can heal her, then? Absolutely sure?”

Something sizzles inside of me, reminding me of who I am, of what I am now. “I’m as certain as the air I breathe. I can heal her.”

She nods in agreement. “Then I must be off to make arrangements. Where do you plan on keeping her until you’re able to heal her? And for that matter, where do you plan on keeping her after? She could come back and tell them what you are. They’ll kill you if they know.”

“We’ll stay in grandma’s old home before and after for as long as it takes for me to trust her not to reveal me and sign all of our death warrants.”

“Can you ever fully trust her?”

I look over at Samira’s form on the bed, not moving, barely breathing, just a shell of the creature I’d spoken to not long ago. The fearlessness, the life, the danger, it’s all gone and only her form remains, stripped bare and waning away.

“I hope so, otherwise all of this will have been for naught.”

The following day, Fern arrives with the carriage. While the Alphas know we’re taking her away to die, they’ve kept the truth from the rest of the pack. Reika assured mother she would deliver the news only when it was necessary and would keep their secret so Samira could pass in peace.

Not being allowed to be with her only granddaughter has caused a grief to run through her that I feel in the land. I can’t imagine being kept from my family during their greatest time of need, and the guilt eats at me for the lie. The very necessary lie.

It’ll all be worth it when I can return her to them, fully healed and healthy again. And it may very well help my own people towards ending the laws that bind us.

Fern paces the floor of the cabin and looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, something I’m not unused to.

“You’re going to get us all killed! You know that right? You can’t heal her. Mother, I can’t believe you’re going along with this delusion.”

Mother’s reply is firm, unyielding. “Fern, she is your sister, your twin, blood of your blood. Have faith in her like I do. Everything will be alright.”

She snorts in reply. “Okay, okay, let’s say Rose does have magick and does heal this Wolf. What then? It’s forbidden. They’ll kill us all!”

“Enough!” The anger that pulses through me is shocking to not only myself but to them, as well. Normally quiet and demure, I’m tired of letting everyone speak for me. Controlling my voice, I continue a bit quieter but no less menacing. “That is quite enough. Play your role, Fern. You know nothing. Enjoy your new husband. Live your life and be happy for as long as you can. This Wolf and my magick are my responsibilities, not yours. I know the risks, but I also know the rewards. Let me do this for myself and our people. Trust me, sister. That’s all I’m asking.”

Fern is quiet for a long time while she mulls over what I’ve said. Looking up at mother, she gives her a curt nod in agreement.

Eyes narrowed, she speaks through gritted teeth. “Fine, but if you get us all killed I’ll haunt you through the next life and the one after that.”

“Fine.”



We arrive just before dusk and sneak her into the hut on the edge of the village. Mother has cleaned grandma’s long unused home and brought in enough supplies and linens to last some time. Well worn and weathered flooring creaks softly beneath our feet as we carry her across the porch and hurry her inside.

It smells like grandma still. A hint of rosemary and something sweet. Baked goods, maybe? Memories assault me but I push them away, focusing instead on the Wolf who may turn out to be my executioner in the end.

Mother, Fern, and I place her on the clean, plush bedding without a single movement to indicate she’s in her body anymore. Something aches in my chest at the thought, something deep that I’m unwilling to examine in the presence of my family.

We all stand back and stare at her like she’s just going to pop up and exclaim she’s cured.

“Well, what in Gods’ names do we do with her now?” Fern blurts out, interrupting the awkwardness.

“We do nothing. You two go home and act as if nothing has changed. Ignore this hut like you have since grandma left. I’ll call on you when I need you.”

Fern snaps her eyes to me. “You want me to leave you here? With her??? With an actual Wolf?”

“Fern, she seems hardly a threat. Trust your sister. Come. It’s supper time.” Mother grabs Fern’s arm and leads her toward the door. “Be careful, Rose. Come get me if you need help.”

“I will. Now both of you go. It’s almost dark.”

The door shuts with a resounding click behind them, signaling my entombment with a living, breathing, Alpha bloodline Wolf. Being in their village was less scary. Now, it’s like I’m with a ghost. They think she’s going to be dead soon, and it’s up to me to either save her or let her die. Samira’s life is literally in my hands.

“Fucked up situation you’ve gotten us into, She-Wolf.”

Not that she’ll answer me, but speaking to her makes me feel less alone. Laying on the bed next to her, I listen to the soft inhale and exhale of her withering body. Nearby, the river is barely audible as it moves and churns with life and promise.

“Confession, Wolf. I have no idea what I’m doing with you here. I don’t know how to heal you. It’s just a feeling I can’t ignore. There’s something about you...” I let myself trail off, feeling stupid for talking to someone who can’t even hear me and even more so for the feelings I’m unable to label.

Uneasiness sinks in, and I do the only thing I can think of. I go below into the hidden archives and look for an answer.

My hands trail along the spines of the books, the circular ends of scrolls, the loose leaf papers laying around me. Sitting on the dank floor, I’m surrounded by the contents of the shelves. It’s been a few hours of searching, and I’ve come up empty handed.

Electric power zings through by blood with what is the slow rise of the full moons. I don’t need to look to see it. Nature is talking to me now. It’s telling me the time is near but not what to do to heal the She-Wolf.

To heal Samira.

Frustrated, I stand from my tomb of unhelpful knowledge and return to her, quiet and frozen in my grandma’s bed. She looks so innocent with

nothing of her Wolf showing through her frail exterior. But I know the truth of how dangerous and powerful she is in her other form, and I secretly yearn to see it again.

Her strong arms and legs have withered during the time I've been with her, and I need to see her that way again. Looking at her now, it's too much. Tears well in my eyes for someone I don't know, for the possibility of never getting the chance to know her, maybe. Chest tight, breathing becomes an effort and I run from the hut for some fresh air.

The air is cool and crisp, blowing through my tattered shift and straight to my flesh. Goosebumps rise all over my body, and I look to the Gods for an answer, any answer. Bright and full, the moons glow like they are letting a secret escape just for me.

Like they are talking just to me.

It hits me then. Power. Knowledge. All with such a force that I'm thrown backward, landing with a thump in a patch of flowers. Flashes of golden eyes standing above me, of my skin feeling aflame, of desire coursing through me, and of fear fill my memory. The answer is obvious. I've been too closed off to hear it this entire time.

With little time to spare, I rush back into the house to do what I know must be done. I feel the power in my blood singing to me, and I feel so strong and full like I might split in half and transform into a star.

Samira is much too heavy for me to lift, or she was, but now I'm able to move her with little effort. Wrapping her body in the sheet from the bed, I carefully maneuver her onto my back and stand on legs that are so much stronger than I ever imagined I could be. Normally towering over me in height, she hangs limply around me like a large rag doll. Heat from her body is almost painful as I walk out of the hut and make my way carefully down the hill behind it to the river.

In her journals, May said magick is our savior and everything surrounding me, underneath my bare feet, the air burning in my lungs from exertion, it all says she's right. I'm magick now. I've always been different, but now I know that I'm not a curse.

I'm the answer.

The stones on the edge of the river are smooth and cool beneath my feet. Carefully, I lower Samira's fiery body to them. Steam sizzling up, I pull the sheet away and her skin makes contact. Hastily, I unpin my wig and toss it to a nearby log. Deathly red hair cascades down my back in freeing rivulets.

"If you're in there, if you can hear me, I need you to know I'm doing this for you. You need to come back, Samira. Come back to your people. They need you." I choke on my next words and whisper them out with a stifled sob. "I need you. I don't know why or what it means, but I need you. Come back to me. Please."

With all of the strength in my body, I lift her from behind, my hands under her arms, and pull her into the water. Freezing cold to my skin, it boils and steams at contact with hers, but I keep moving deeper into the river until the current feels like it's going to pull us both away.

Then, it stops. I make it stop. The current lessens to a gentle motion, and I hold Samira from underneath as her body floats ethereally before me. She looks like an angel, a dark angel sending up steam around her like her demon is trying to free itself.

The world freezes around us. Trees don't move, frogs don't croak, water lays frozen like in the winter. Light shines down on us so brightly it's almost painful. Three moons align in the sky, full and powerful, and it hits me. It hits both of us.

Power.

Electrified, a deadly current shoots from my body to hers in violent jolts of magickal energy. Samira jerks with the intensity of my power surging into her. For the first time since I've been with her, there's movement in her body. Jaw tight, teeth clinched, her eyes flutter beneath her purple lids.

"Let me go," an angelic voice whispers, but her mouth hasn't moved. The voice—the voice was inside my head.

Her voice!

“Samira! Are you in there? Talk to me again!”

“Let me go,” she whispers in my head again.

So, I do.

I let her go and take a few steps back and watch the beautiful frail woman before me change into something—more.

Skin shuddering like it’s vibrating, her body grows before my eyes, muscles filling back out to even bigger than she was before. Her black silky hair that has dulled in recent weeks grows and surrounds her in the water, shining like it’s coated in gemstones.

Black, glowing power flows from her, starting at her fingertips but quickly moving throughout her body and filling the water around her. My golden energy shoots from my heart in response, straight through her darkness into the center of her chest and grows. It grows to such a level of brightness and brilliance that I’m briefly fearful. Not of her or myself, but of the meaning of it all.

My body betrays my willpower and pulls me towards her, the electric magick now fully encasing my heart and glowing through my soaked shift, lighting up the water between our bodies. Energy reaches for energy as I heal her and feel her energy touching mine like darkness touching light. She’s taking from me but giving me something back at the same time.

I feel it. The connection we have. The thoughts in her head. The pain and fear and love in our now joined souls.

And then, her golden eyes open and she turns her head and looks at me.

CHAPTER 12

SAMIRA

Waking from a deep paralysis to power coursing through me like fire and brimstone, teeth and claws, blood and flesh, peace and love...

It's like nothing I've ever experienced as a Wolf. The sensation of the dark power and the pure, golden fire in my heart hits me first. I can hear her soft breaths next to me. I can smell her sweetness, her delicious temptation so close. But most of all, I can feel her inside of me and around me.

She's in my blood, in my skin, in my heart. And she's golden light and goodness to my darkness that has awakened.

And I want more.

Finally, after being stuck in the dark for so long, my eyes open to the moons burning down their light upon me, upon us, and I turn my head in the water to my emerald-eyed salvation surrounded in a halo of forbidden red hair.

She's perfection layered in a golden energy crackling from her heart through the water and straight into me. And I want nothing more than to own her. All of her.

“You.” It comes out more like an accusation than the grateful relief I’m truly feeling.

Her response is silence layered with excitement and fear and lust. I can feel it. I don’t need her to say a thing. I can feel everything she’s feeling through whatever bond she’s created between us in this river.

Clearing my throat, I try to control the new dark energy I feel in my body before I speak again.

“You saved me. Come closer, little Red.”

She’s afraid but intrigued. I feel it, but she does as she’s told and takes a step forward.

“Closer,” I growl.

Another step closer but still too far away.

“Closer,” I whisper.

And she takes the final step necessary to seal the distance between us, her breasts pressing up against my arm floating on the surface of the water.

Golden magick now flows freely from her and surrounds my darkness, seeping into cracks and crevices, tickling me with love and lust.

Emerald eyes lock with my golden ones and reflect back the power that she’s soaking into me. Our faces are mere inches from each other and I allow my gaze to trace every curve, memorize every freckle, and then linger on her slightly parted lips as soft breaths escape her in a pant.

“You saved me. Why?”

“Selfish reasons,” she whispers shakily.

“Tell me why, Rose.”

“For my people.”

“Is that all?” I taunt her knowingly. I just want to hear her say it.

“No. More for myself.” A beautiful blush creeps up her neck and flushes her cheeks.

“Say it, Rose. Why did you save me?”

She swallows deeply, drawing my attention to her throat. I want to sink my teeth into her and coat my tongue in her sweet, savory blood as she sings my name.

“Because even though we are enemies and I should hate you, I can’t imagine a life where you don’t exist. Because even if I can’t have you, I want you to live.”

With no warning, the world returns to normal. Sound returns, the current picks up, and my body moves to stand in the water like the past weeks never existed. Standing before her, she’s frozen in shock as I tower over her small frame and look down into the emerald gemstone pools of truth that I want to get lost in.

My hand shoots out with a speed that is new to me and wraps around the back of her neck, my fingers wrapping around the hair at the base of her skull. Shocked eyes stare up at me and a sweet gasp escapes her beautiful lips. Lips that I can’t resist anymore.

I devour her mouth fiercely, passionately. My tongue intrudes without permission and caresses hers, owning her, claiming her. Crushing her body against mine, I lift her up, her legs wrapping around my waist instinctively. Too soon, I release the kiss and trail my lips and tongue along her jaw and down her neck.

The darkness touches my senses as the blood pulsing beneath her soft skin sings to me. Wolf fangs grow in my mouth and before I’m able to think better of it, I sink them into her neck. Sweet blood flows into my mouth, filling me with fire and flowers, nature and death, light and love.

Her body arches beneath me, pressing the heat between her thighs into my abdomen and warming me in the cold water. Moans of pleasure escape us both as I take her life into me, her power into me. The woman is pure ecstasy and everything I’ve been fantasizing about but more, so much more.

Pulling my fangs away from her flesh, I lick the vicious wound on her neck and watch it heal instantly. Peppering her freshly healed skin with kisses, I murmur into her, “I need you. I need to feel you. Take me home, Rose.”



Our bodies crash into each other the moment the door of the hut closes behind us. There’s a terrifying but exciting new power that surges through me. I don’t know if it’s because of her or because of who I’ve become, but there will be time to figure it out later. Right now, all I want is to feel her soft skin against mine, to taste her, to own her.

Grabbing her shift at the neckline, I easily rip it off her body and toss it to the floor. Moonlight seeps in through the windows and bathes her in an effervescent glow that sends fire racing through my blood and sets my skin ablaze with desire.

Small framed with light brown skin and beautiful freckles dappling her shoulders, nose, and cheekbones, she is less like a child than what she tries to appear and more like a petite goddess.

Her small but supple breasts are peaked with dark pink nipples, taunted under my gaze and begging for me to taste them.

Rose is frozen in her nudity. Small hands cover the triangle of pleasure between her thighs like she’s ashamed of it.

“No.” I jerk her hands away, revealing a small patch of red hair. “No, Rose. You will never hide who you are from me when we are alone. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” she whispers, eyes averted and looking to the floor.

Slowly and gently, I reach my hand out and cup her chin, forcing her face back up to look at me. “And you bow your head to no one, goddess. You

are magickal. You are powerful. You owe no explanations, no apologies, nothing to anyone. Hold your head high. Do you hear me, Rose?"

"I hear you," she announces with pride.

"Good. Now let me worship my goddess." Dropping to kneel before her, I bury my face at the apex of her thighs and inhale deeply. "Gods, Rose. You are so much more than I ever could have imagined."

Goosebumps break out on her skin making her tiny peach fuzz hairs stand on end. "I've, uh, never been with a woman before. I'm nervous."

"Neither have I," I confess, inhaling deeply of her essence.

"Or a man," she whispers.

"Me, either." With no warning, I test both of our nerves and conviction and lick between her soft folds. The taste, the sound she makes, the power I feel being the first person to taste her sweet cunt...

"Uh, fuck yesssss," she mewls.

That's all the permission I need. Hands wrapping around her small but ample hips, I toss her backward a few feet onto the bed as if she were a feather.

A sweet giggle escapes her as she bounces on the mattress. That sound does something to me. It makes me want to hear it more. So much more. And for the rest of my life. The thought scares me because of what it will mean for the struggle we'll both face, but I push it away and close the space between us in two quick strides.

She's naked, bathed in moonlight, glowing like a goddess with a fiery blush creeping up her neck and flooding her cheeks. Her eyes widen as I stand before her, assessing her body, contemplating my next move. I've waited so long for this, for her, and I want it to be right. I want it to be perfect.

Darkness edges into my mind, calling to me, telling me to take her as she is. To bury my face between her thighs, to bite her beautifully darkened nipples, sink my fangs into her neck, taste her blood, her life force.

I feel my body shift slightly, harden. My nails and fangs grow. My muscles become taught and defined. But her green eyes shine back at me like the most vibrant of emeralds and tell me what her mouth doesn't.

I trust you with my body. Take it.

The connection between us becomes solid gold entwining with black, and I can hear her, feel her, taste her all around me. She's in the air, in my bones, in my soul.

"I mean it," she whispers. "I trust you. Take me as you will."

With all the permission I need, I sink to my knees before her and bury my face deep between her thighs. Fucking her with my tongue, sucking her sweet clit, rubbing my nose up and down her bud, covering myself in her wetness. If I die right now, it will all be worth it to have been able to love this woman for a few moments.

"Oh, Gods!" she cries out, her hands wrapping in the hair on the back of my head. Knees pulled up, she pulls my face harder against her body, circling her hips and grinding her sweet pussy against my face. "Oh, Gods, Samira! Just like that!"

Wrapping my hand around the outside of her thigh, I reach up and over and spread her wider with my fingers. Her sweet bud exposed more, I suck it into my mouth, laving it up and down, round and round, sucking harder and harder until her legs quake around my head. Right when I think she can't take anymore, I sink two fingers deep into her soaking cunt.

"Ahhhhh!" Rose cries out but pulls me tighter against her body. "Gods, yes!"

I know what I like, so experimentally I try it on her and massage her inner walls in the spot that always sends me over the edge. Tongue massaging her sweet little bud, I pulse my fingers deep inside of her until she's convulsing beneath me and screaming my name.

"Samira! Fuuuuuuuccckkkkkk!!!!!"

And right when she begs me to stop, says she can't take anymore, I stand between her thighs and strip off the thin top and pants I'm wearing and

swing my leg over hers, aligning our pussies.

“Do you really want me to stop, little Red?” I taunt, a dark smile on my face.

“I, uh, I don’t know. There’s so much...fuck! So much sensation. I feel my magick trying to break free. I can’t control it.”

Swirling my hips, our wet cunts grind together in a delicious, dangerous dance. “Then don’t, my Rose. Don’t control it. Let your magick flow free with me.”

Hands gripped on her thigh, I grind myself down on her juicy pussy, the sound a delicious combination of wetness and her moans.

“Samira, I can’t—I can’t—I’m gonna—”

“Let go, Rose. Let go with me. I can handle whatever you have.”

My own pleasure starts to peak as I watch her come undone beneath me. Her pants and moans escape when she’s no longer able to hold them back, and my own accompany them unhindered.

“You feel so good beneath me. Like you are always meant to be joined to me. Open your eyes, Rose. Look at me.”

Emerald green eyes surrounded by red hair alight with magickal fire stare up at me in wonder and passion. I’m hers just as much as she is mine, and she knows it. Her small but strong hand reaches up and cups my breast, squeezing my nipple, sending shockwaves through me straight to my clit.

“Fuck! Again!” I demand.

Rose pinches and fondles, squeezes and flicks my breasts, pushing me so close to release that my vision starts to blacken. Right when I don’t think I can take anymore, she slides her hand down my stomach, over my hip, and cups my ass. Timidly, she finds my tight forbidden entrance and presses just the tip of her finger inside, just barely surpassing the tight internal rim, and I explode.

“Rose, fuck! Rose! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

“Samira, yes! Grind harder! Harder!!!! Yyyeessssss!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Vision black, dark flames bursting from me, golden light wrapping around me and holding my darkness tightly, lovingly, we both cum in a euphoric pleasure that I’m sure the Gods can feel.



Sleep has never been so restful, so perfect, and waking wrapped up in Rose’s bare flesh is a dream in itself. I can’t believe she saved me. Even more so, I can’t believe what we did last night. The deliciously sinful tingles between my thighs and all over my skin are a reminder that I never want to forget.

“Mmmmm. Good morning, Sammie.”

“Good morning, my sweet Rose.”

“I’ve been lying here for a long time waiting for you to wake.”

“It was the best sleep I’ve ever had thanks to you.”

She’s quiet. Too quiet. “What are you thinking, little Red?”

Her voice is soft, an inaudible whisper to anyone who doesn’t have Wolf hearing. “I’m scared to leave this bed. It’ll all be over and we’ll both have to go back to our lives as if this thing between us never happened.”

I don’t know what to say because of course she’s right. We don’t live in a world where we can be together. Our union, our love, if this is love—Gods, let it be love for her because it most definitely feels that way to me—our love is forbidden, punishable, an executable offense for her and potentially the same or banishment for me.

“I’m scared, too.” I confess, though I don’t know what else to say because nothing can make our reality better.

“Is there anything we can do? Any way to change the Alphas’ minds, change the pack mind?”

Thinking for a while, I run scenario after scenario through my head but come up with the same result. “No. I don’t think there is. They think your people are dangerous when they have magick. If they find out about your red hair, you’re dead. If they find out about our union, you’re dead. If they suspect any magick at all lives within your people—” I swallow deeply, not wanting to speak the next words but knowing they are the truth.

“We’re all dead,” she finishes for me in a heartbreaking tone that belies the reality of our lives.

Tears leak down both of our faces as I cradle her to my chest and bury my nose in the floral and earthy scent of her bright red hair. My fingers trail the length of her back, down her spine, over the curve of her hip and then her thigh wrapped over mine. I trace the back of her calf down to her ankle and memorize the feel of the bones along the top of her beautifully strong feet that have carried her through life and kept her alive thus far.

She kisses the skin between my breasts, right where my heart beats so loudly, so strongly, that it feels like it’s going to rip through my flesh. And if it did, I would gladly hand it over to her to keep for herself because even though I’ve never been with another person this intimately and even though I’ve never loved another person outside of my family, I know with my entire being that she is all there is and all there ever will be for me.

And I can’t keep her.

CHAPTER 13

ROSE

A FEW WEEKS LATER

“They’re coming,” the terrified voice whispers in urgency. “You must hurry. Rose? Rose!” Mother hisses, jolting me from a deep sleep.

“Huh? Wha—?”

“Rose! Get up! They’re coming! Hide now. Hurry, girl, hurry.”

The sounds of feet shuffling and floor boards being moved, rugs being unrolled, and the sizzle of something pungent on the fire sets off alarm bells in my brain. Shooting up in bed, I quickly tie my hair up and put on my wig, securing it in place with pins.

“They’re at the Woodbournes,” my sister, Fern, squeaks from her perch at the gap in the boarded up window, the whites of her eyes showing from across the room. The roundness of her belly has just started to show and her husband is away in the human village on business for the day. I thought it would be nice to spend time with her to take my mind off my shattered heart, but I was wrong. Seeing her deeply in love hurts more now that I’ve finally found my own but can’t have her.

“Rose! Snap out of it!” Fern hisses.

I’m out of time. Grabbing my satchel, I throw on the putrid smelling shift I keep for these Godsforsoaken inspections and peek out of the back door. Seeing the coast is clear, I make a run for the pig enclosure and hop over

the gate. Landing in the knee deep muck, I grab handfuls and cover myself as I make my way to one of the pig huts through the mass of smelly, fleshy creatures that have become my safe haven since I was able to walk.

Pounding fists echo off the front door of my family home. “Riverbournes! Inspection! Open up!” The voice is one I’ve come to loathe, but fear would be a better response.

Proctor Fenris. Not only is he one of the largest men and Wolves that I’ve ever seen, but he is also one of the most cruel. He treats us like we are nothing more than vermin, coming into our homes, searching and damaging our property to make sure we are abiding by *their* laws, and taking whatever he wants. No sense of humanity or compassion crosses Fenris’s eyes. Not one ounce in the years he’s been assigned to us since our former Proctor went mysteriously missing.

Kind and caring, compassionate, and full of humanity, Proctor Okami became an ally and friend to our villagers. She enforced the laws when we broke them, but in caring for her we tried our hardest to follow them or hide our indiscretions so she never had to.

Mother tells me she was more like family to the Riverbournes, and we owed her a great debt. I was around eight years old when she discovered my existence. Until then, my family passed me off as my sister or completely hid me away. They had a special blonde wig that matched Fern’s hair for the rare occasion I needed to step outside of our hut.

The rest of the village was told we kept my existence a secret from the Proctors, but someone let the Riverbourne twins slip from their mouths and Okami came to see it for herself. Unannounced, she paid us an inspection on a random day and interrupted supper. Sitting around the table, Fern with her blonde hair and me with my brown wig, it was impossible for my parents to deny the truth.

“Why have you done this, Laurel? Jacob? Why have you hidden twins from us?” After all of these years, I can still remember how Okami looked more hurt because of our betrayal than anything else.

“She was so different from birth. Quiet, reserved, small. We didn’t think she would survive, but when she did, her uniqueness seemed to—” my

mother looks to father for help.

“Expand.” He finished her sentence for her and reached to grab her hand in comfort. “She’s a gift, Okami. A special person that this world does not deserve. She may not talk to you, but she sees you. She’s smart beyond measure, kind, and gentle. We only wanted to protect her.” Remembering the way my father spoke of me, his eyes bright and full of emotion, it was obvious he believed every word.

Okami nodded in understanding and looked at me for a long time. At eight years old, I squared my shoulders and looked back into her eyes, feeling the brightness of her soul.

“I’ll help you fix this so you don’t have to answer for your crime. Because let me be clear, hiding the existence of a Red is a crime, Laurel and Jacob. But I know you and I know how much you both care for your family. You didn’t do this maliciously. You did it out of love. I’m going to go back into our records and fix it as if she has been here the entire time. I’ll write her traits down as mute and reclusive, and that should do it. No harm done.”

“Thank you,” mother sobbed. “Thank you so much for this.”

Proctor Okami held up her hand to silence mother. “No thanks needed, but promise me you’ll never lie to me again, Riverbournes. What I’m doing comes at great personal risk. If I’m discovered I could be severely punished or banished, and then they’ll come to punish or execute you for good measure. Tell me you understand how serious this is and promise me.”

My parents looked at Okami with adoration beaming from them and promised her they would never lie to her again. With many thanks and hugs, Okami left that night and we never saw her again. For a few weeks, we waited for word from her or for the Wolves to send our punishment but there was nothing. We didn’t know if she fixed the records until her asshole replacement showed up to do a headcount of our entire household, and I was on his list.

And today is just another inspection where Proctor Fenris makes us truly miss Okami and her kindness. Terrifying and with no care for us, my parents believe the best way to deal with him is to let him think whatever

he wants about me while avoiding him during inspections. In his mind I'm an odd child, so I'm forced to play the part I hate so much. I'm usually able to hide from him, but right now he's in a particularly foul mood and demanding to see me with his own eyes.

"Where is your mute child?" an annoyed voice booms from inside my home.

A soft spoken woman, my mother can't be heard responding, but it's usually something along the lines of, "Oh that child just seems to wander off. She might be hiding somewhere or out with the pigs again. Who knows? She knows to come home when it starts getting dark."

The backdoor flies open and smacks the side of the house, breaking a pane out of a window. Glass tumbles to the worn planks of the porch. Tucked into a pig hut, I sink further down into the muck up to my waist and attempt to hide behind a large sow. Men like Proctor Fenris and his companions don't like to get their shoes dirty, especially with mud and pig shit, so they'll more than likely walk right past me. The added benefit of the rankness of the muck deters the Wolves senses even further.

"Find the child. All must be accounted for today."

"Another breach, sir?" a quieter man speaks up, the voice unfamiliar.

"Of course, another fucking breach! They can't wander out of bounds whenever they want. There are laws for a reason. Now find that child so we can mark her off the list."

"Is she really fond of the pigs, sir? The smell alone makes me want to lose my breakfast. I'm not keen on going in there."

"You don't have to," he says tersely. "You stand on that side of the pen and I'll stand over here. Take your cane and bang on the roof of the huts. Pigs run out. I see in from here, and we'll find the child like we always do. Then we can go home and forget this shithole for another month."

"Yes, sir."

The banging starts at the hut next to mine followed by squeals and animals sloshing through the filth. I don't stand a fucking chance. Resigned to my

hiding place being found, I do what I've always done and cover my face in the filth and get ready to act my ass off.

Magick surges through my body in a fight or flight instinctual reaction, but I fight to suppress it.

Right on cue, the banging sounds on my pig hut roof and the huge sow hiding me takes off in an ear-splitting, squealing panic. I press myself to the back of the hut and stare out with rounded, frightened eyes at the narrowed yellow eyes of Proctor Fenris peering in at me from his safety across the pen.

"Ah, there she is. Same as always. Wallowing in pig shit." He turns on a fake smile that I'm sure he intends to be friendly but only makes him look like something out of a nightmare with his overly large canine teeth gleaming brightly.

Speaking slowly, he addresses me. "Good morning, child! Come out and talk to me."

I quickly avert my eyes and stare down at the mess in front of me.

Guess I'm going for the whole damn show today.

I sigh internally and throw myself face down on the floor of the hut and pretend to crawl to him, only succeeding in sinking myself down even further. Mouth inches from contamination, I smile like I'm not about to eat literal shit and keep up the charade.

The younger Proctor comes into view next to the Senior Proctor. "Uh, sir. Looks like she's about to drown in shit."

"I can see that," he grumbles. "Guess I did my part and laid eyes on her. Our job is done here. Let's go."

"Sir, maybe we should tell her mother so she doesn't actually drown in filth. The optics might not bode well for our pack if the child dies while we're here inspecting."

"You can tell her since you feel so passionately about it," he calls over his shoulder, feet in a brisk walk towards the front of our village. "I have

places to be.”

Seeming to be a bit kinder, the young Proctor rushes up to the backdoor and pounds on it.

“Oh, yes? Can I help you, Proctor sir?” My mother’s sweet voice carries down to me while the pig shit pulls me down further, mere centimeters from my mouth.

“Ma’am, we found your daughter in the pig pen. She’s about two inches from drowning in the muck in the second hut from the right.”

“Oh, Gods! Thank you, Proctor! Thank you so much! My sweet girl has no concept of danger. Rose, darling, stay still. Stop moving. Mother is coming for you.”

She’s going to be pissed about ruining her shoes and clothing because of my stupidity, but it’s a role she devised for me and I play it expertly. Shit creeps towards my bottom lip as the deep muck forms a suction and pulls me down further. I freeze in place, hoping that’ll stop the inevitable.

It doesn’t. Cold and gritty, the putrid slop sloshes with the movement of the pigs and covers my lips, lurching into my nostrils. The vomit shoots up my throat before I can control it, and that’s where my mother finds me.

Sunken belly down in pig shit and puking my guts out.

“Well, when you go for it you really go for it, don’t you?”

Reaching out towards her, I bend my neck at an awkward angle to give her time to pull me free. With the strength of an ox, or a mama bear as I’ve come to think of her, she wrenches me from the muck and drags me from the pen. Only when I’ve hit the grass does she let me go and plops down next to me.

“Mother, thank you,” I pant through continued wretches, though my body has nothing left to expel.

“My baby isn’t dying today, Rose, but don’t expect to get out of this for free.” Jumping up, she pulls off her shift and undergarments, standing bare as the day she was born for the sky and the Gods to witness. “Clothes. You.

River. Wash. Now! And don't you dare come back in my home until you smell like daisies!" With a chuckle, she rushes up to the house and flings open the door.

"Laurel Aster Riverbourne! What in the Gods' names..." but my father's loud protestations are cut off abruptly.

"Uh uh! Nope!" Fern bolts out of the back door and slams it closed, leaning on it, her face pale like she's seen a ghost. "I don't need that haunting me in my sleep! Byyyyyyye!"

The latch clicks in place as Fern hurries down the path towards her in-laws home, and I take my cue. Knowing what's about to happen between my parents, I quickly gather my mother's clothes in the washing basket and dash off towards the river. Nothing can keep those two from each other. Not even father's chair.

CHAPTER 14

SAMIRA

When I returned to my pack, I stood before the Alphas fully healed, more powerful actually, and explained away how I was nursed back from death by the Reds. They bought it, but I have little time until the moons force me to change again and will be unable to keep them out of my head.

Distance helps, but pack rituals keep me close. Unless I run. Should I run? Can I run away from my family when the Wolf is in full control and the moons are huge and bright singing to me in the night sky? Can I hide amongst the humans in their village and pass myself off as one of them?

These are the thoughts rushing through my head as I sit by the river that leads down to the valley. Down to her. What would happen if I ran away and chose self-banishment? Would they allow me to live with her?

No, absolutely not. I don't even know why I allowed the thought to enter my mind. We're forbidden to be together. It's the law. It's our law, and it makes my heart ache deeply.

Expectations have always followed me. As the granddaughter of the current and longest reigning Alpha in our pack's history, I'm a potential next Alpha. I'm expected to train, be strong, be clever, keep the Reds in line while also maintaining the peace and security of our own people.

As leader of our own sort of militarized government, the Alpha has to assume many roles. To maintain order, she came up with laws and titles. Proctors perform monthly inspections of the Reds to keep them in line and maintain their honesty. Fenris has a little band of followers, but everyone knows he's the head Proctor and the one the Reds fear the most. Reika and Rikon share the role of Arbiter and Castigator, which means they resolve disputes within the pack but also between Wolves and Reds and dole out harsh punishments to anyone who violates the laws and rules our pack have set forth.

Then, there's the Guard. Warriors who protect us and have fought and won countless battles throughout our history. They were created to keep people in line when the Alphas started to enact laws and rules on the Reds. Fierce and always victorious, the Guard spilled Red blood during the Burning Times alongside my own family. I used to hate them for what they did, but now that I'm older, I can see they were only following orders and fell into the lies. Most of the Wolves from back then are retired or gone, and the current Guard seems to only be around for hunting and the occasional coup attempt from outsiders.

I once thought it all sounded like something I would want to do, but the more I see how we treat the Reds, the less I want anything to do with it. We make demands on them and their supplies and receive only supplication and kindness in return. No matter how harsh they are treated, they bend, never break. Resilience is a trait I've come to respect the more I observe them. Being told they are dangerous and our mortal enemy and then seeing the opposite, well—it has me questioning everything.

Who I am. Where I want to be. What I believe to be true versus myths and misplaced fear.

And to top it all off, here I am, a twenty-four year old woman with no betrothal or prospects that I find remotely viable, floundering along with an entire pack of eyes on me, waiting. They wait for the day I finally snap into my birth-given role and step up as the next Alpha in line. But what they don't care to know or see is I don't want it.

Being a cruel ruler has zero appeal to me. I'm still trying to find myself, but what I do know is there's nothing about the iron fist of the current

Alpha that calls to me. More animalistic and with less humanity, life in the pack seems like it holds less weight than my conscience can allow. And because of that, I've always kept to myself and tried to stay out of the light.

Living low key is even more important now that I have this dangerous dark energy pulsing inside of me. I don't know who I can trust with the knowledge or if I can control it. Whispers of rage are always just below the surface, but I've been able to maintain my composure.

Until *he* forced my hand.

Proctor Fenris has just returned from a visit to the Crimson Valley, and he is pissed beyond measure. Sitting in the meeting hall, I observe as my proposed future title requires me to do while he rants and raves to my grandmother, the Alpha.

Reika the Red sits upon her throne of animal horns, bones, and furs, assessing the pacing Fenris beneath her. Her face is passive and gives away no emotion, just as she always has. It's her tone that holds her power. Booming and massive, too much for the space, she fills a room with voice alone. When she speaks, we all listen.

But Fenris is too lost in his emotions to notice the subtleties of her annoyance. The way her eyes wrinkle just a tad at the corners. The way the muscle in her jaw flexes every now and then when she clinches her teeth together. Her large hands wrapped around the arms of her chair, gripping so tightly the whites of her knuckles look like they're about to rip through the skin.

"And I realize, Alpha, we all have a role to play, but I'm too large and too important in this pack to keep babysitting the fucking Reds. Do you know where I found the Riverbourne's mute child today? Do you?!" He screeches as he stares her down accusingly. "In the pig pen, sunken down in shit! Is this what you want of your greatest warrior? To deal with those weaklings and pig shit when I could be in charge of your Guard?"

My grandfather remains silent next to grandmother. Rikon, silent and calm but vicious when necessary, is the perfect balance to my somewhat

hotheaded grandmother. He quietly attempts to calm her with a gentle hand on her arm.

While the pack respects him as an Alpha, he's not The Alpha. He doesn't rule the pack but stands beside his mate and supports her. Their love is one that transcends time, age, war, illness, and death. Together, they've suffered greatly but they've also conquered much.

The rest of us in the meeting hall hold our breath. The silence goes on for an uncomfortable amount of time as Fenris has time to process his behavior and then lowers his outspread arms and drops his gaze to the floor.

In a quiet tone, he dares to speak. "Forgive me, Al—"

"Forgive?" she booms. "Forgive you, for what? For coming in here and bitching about the role you play in our pack? Forgive you for raising your voice to me, as if anything you have to say matters? Forgive you for monthly complaints for the past ten years every, single time you have to do your fucking job? Is that what you want me to forgive you for, Fenris?"

For once in his life, he takes the hint and doesn't answer her.

Grandmother clucks her tongue at him. "No, Fenris. Not today. I'm not forgiving you today. In fact, I'm quite tired of you. The moons come soon, and I'm in a particularly foul mood already. But you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to let you make it up to me, Proctor Fenris."

"And how should I do that, Alpha?" he mumbles, eyes still downturned to the floor.

I hold my breath, waiting for her response. My grandmother isn't known to be lenient when it comes to those who cross her, and Fenris has had his share of reprieves over the years. Looking around, the rest of the onlookers seem to have sunken down in their chairs and back into the shadows. The last Wolf that angered her this badly ended up on assignment in the mountains, and it's been years since we've seen her again.

Silently, I pray to the Gods for Fenris to meet the same punishment. His cunning and cruelty know no bounds, even when it comes to us. He's the one I sensed in the woods when I discovered Rose's secret. He's the one I

feared would find her before she was back in the safety of her village. With him gone, I can breathe a little easier and the Reds might get a nicer Proctor as a replacement. Or they could get a worse one. Either way, I need Fenris contained far away from here.

“Fenris, we’ve known each other a long time. I was there when you were born into this pack, and if your behavior continues I will not hesitate to be the one that takes you out of this pack and out of your mortal coil. Do I make myself fucking clear?!”

“Y-yes, Alpha.” He’s actually shaking. Shaking!

“Good boy. Now, onto your punishment.”

Mountains, mountains, mountains, I chant to myself.

“Fenris, for the crime of insubordination and damn near treason I sentence you to the rack.”

“The rack?!” Anger reverberates from him. “You can’t be serious! For what? Speaking up against the bullshit you’re running here?”

“Fenris, you’re on thin ground. I would shut up while you’re ahead,” my grandfather chides. A man of few words, he’s always been a fierce proponent of my grandmother. When he speaks, everyone listens, but Fenris is too far gone with his emotions.

“Shut up?” he whispers to himself, and then something visibly snaps into place. His body grows taller. His chest puffs out. Arms held wide with muscles taught and bulging, he turns his glare on Rikon. “For what? Fear of her? That old copse of fur?” A maniacal laugh bellows out of him.

Turning towards the rest of the room, he raises his arms out as if in challenge. “She’s held back this pack, our people for far too long. We could own this land, all of it, but instead we are bound to a treaty none of us agreed to. The Reds live on our land, take our time and resources, threaten our lives with their existence. And instead of killing them all and being done with it, we cater to some treaty agreed upon by ancient Wolves and men who are nothing more than dust in the ground. I think it’s about time for a new regime and a new Alpha. Who’s with me?” Furious eyes gleam beneath his furrowed brow as saliva drips from the corner of his

mouth. He's almost frothing like a rabid animal at the thought of the throne and title.

No one moves a muscle, frozen in place by the shock of what he's said and the fear of what's to come. A laugh starts, low at first, and then rises to a crescendo. Everyone turns wide eyes toward the Alpha. Even Fenris seems taken off guard. Grandfather knows what's coming and sinks down in his chair, covering his eyes with his hand in exasperation.

"Old copse of fur?" she chuckles. "That's a new one." Wiping tears from her eyes, grandmother gathers herself and then snaps abruptly back into her role. "Too bad you don't stand a chance in a challenge against me, young one," she growls, the sound reverberating off the walls and deep within my chest. Standing, in a swift motion she flips the large table in front of her out of the way and takes a measured step down the dais, power rippling through her.

"This again?" Rikon mumbles, more to himself than anyone else but all of our Wolf ears pick up on it. He sighs and straightens to his full height on his matching throne, not taking his eyes off his mate for a single moment. It's not concern I see in them, more like vexation. I wonder how many times they've seen this exact thing play out in their lifetimes.

Everyone in the room immediately pushes away from Fenris and the advancing Alpha, plastering ourselves to the walls. If it ends anything like the last challenge, there will be blood. Lots of blood, and anyone caught in the crossfire is shit out of luck because once it starts it's not stopping.

With each measured step down from the dais, grandmother's body physically grows both in height and width. Rippling at first and then turning to a blur, once she's hit the final step her Wolf form has taken over. Powerful muscles, amber fur, and teeth bared, she stands in front of him nose to nose, staring level into his eyes. Fenris trembles beneath her silver gaze but puffs his chest out in false bravado. It's no secret he's wanted the title of Alpha for a very long time, but it seems that he might be second guessing himself at this exact moment.

"Is this what you want, Alpha?" he spits through gritted teeth.

“I’d say it’s what you wanted when you openly challenged her, young man.” Concern and remorse etches my grandfather’s eyes. He knows what’s coming. We all do. Fenris is a cruel, ignorant prick. He brought what’s about to happen down on himself. Grandfather sighs loudly. “Might as well shift and get it over with Fenris. Mind the furniture and take it outside, would you?”

Anger building in his eyes, Fenris turns and stalks out of the meeting hall and turns the corner out of sight. The Alpha follows, snarling quietly. It’s not uncommon for her to be forced to defend her title. She has won for hundreds of years and by the looks of her now, she will continue her reign for countless more. It’s the challengers I always feel sorry for. The end result of banishment, lameness, death, or a combination thereof should be a deterrent.

But once again, here we are. About to witness a massacre.

Her large paws touch the soft dirt just outside of the doors, and with no warning he attacks from the side, latching down on her neck.

A gasp escapes me. I didn’t hear him shift, didn’t expect him to attack her without warning, and by the looks of the blood running in rivers down onto the ground, neither did she.

“Cheat! Cheat!” The onlookers yell at Fenris. A large crowd has formed while the rest of us burst from the meeting hall to witness the battle.

There are rules to follow when challenging another Wolf for their higher title, dignity to maintain even in loss or death. Fenris jumping on the Alpha unsuspectingly rather than waiting for the fight to commence infuriates everyone. Even if he wins, he will be assassinated. Daciana just warned him not long ago after he tried to attack me in the forest. Surely he has to see winning will still mean his immediate death.

But before I’m able to even process the possibility of Fenris winning, grandmother rips herself away from him, leaving behind a sizable chunk of her flesh in his mouth. Standing face to face, they circle each other with a wide berth between themselves.

Low, unfamiliar growls start behind me. Turning, I see five Wolves pushing through the crowd of unshifted human forms. I don't know them. I've never seen them or smelled them before.

What are they doing here?

Before I'm able to fully process, they push past me into the circle and stand to the sides of Fenris.

It's a coup!

Growls erupt from all around, fur and fangs springing forth from the Guard and members of the Alpha's direct line. The memories and longing for Rose are no longer on my mind. The only thing I can think of is to save my grandmother and protect my pack.

Pain shoots through my body like a fire lives in my bones. Darkness surrounds me and takes over as sinew rips, muscles tear, bones grow, and within seconds I'm standing on all fours next to my grandmother with Rikon on her other side.

The large brown Wolf with gray fur streaking through one eye and up to his ear seems more like a warrior than the calm, gentle grandfather I've come to know. Head down, teeth bared, he dares them to step closer.

Others join us in a line to protect and support our pack from this group of would-be killers, but a voice booms through our heads and halts any motion.

"So, Fenris, it seems you've been planning behind my back for quite a while."

"And it seems you're losing a lot of blood," he chuckles back.

"I assure you, it's nothing more than a scratch, pup." Her tone is mocking, taunting. "Now, since you really want to do this thing, at least one side will follow the law. Your little surprise of five on one won't do. We'll follow the old ways. You and your five. Me and mine."

"Fine. You have thirty seconds."

A wall goes down and Fenris is blocked out of our mental conversation, but when she turns and looks at her entire pack backing her, at her most vicious fighters and family at her side, we don't need the block to understand.

Rikon will fight at her side as he always has. Fayez, our greatest warrior, stands proud and focused with his second in command, Alaric, next to him at the ready.

Aunt Daciana, steps forward in an all too familiar fury. Since the loss of her mate before I was born, it's said she's only ever felt rage and pain, and it shows in her black eyes. Fur of pure white, she wears her grief and pain in full view of everyone. That's what makes her deadly. She is vicious and has nothing to live for, so she has become one that fights with her whole being.

And that is why she has never been defeated in battle.

Looking around, there are so many more willing to step forward and risk themselves against the gigantic beasts that dare to challenge. But it's not their responsibility. It's the blood family's responsibility to protect our Alpha and our pack. I know what I must do.

Stepping forward, I stare down my grandmother with the dark fury that is all too new to me emanating from my pores. "Don't say it. I'm sure I've heard it all before. Trust my training. Trust me. I've got this. It's my family, too." Those last words say everything that I can't. Even though I was thrown away as a child and found my way back to my pack, I'm here now and will sacrifice everything for them.

Even myself.

Sinking into my new found power and the new feral beast that was unleashed when I came back from near death, I let the fury and rage fill me with darkness. The golden center Rose left inside of my core shines brightly and balances me.

Daciana stands next to me and sniffs once in my direction. Her eyes narrow even more as she recognizes the similar darkness within me that she carries within herself. Similar but different.

Our Alpha squares up, facing down her target. The only target that matters. The rest of us will handle the other five. Gauging my competition, I look them over. While they are big, the four males look like they haven't properly eaten or been taken care of in years. Their emotions will get the best of them. With a quick assessment, I take note of scars and weaknesses with each of them. Then, I set my focus on my target.

Smaller than the males, she's more like a rabid coyote than a Wolf. Yellow fur and eyes that match, she's shifty and nervous, like they talked her into their plan rather than letting her choose to go along with it. But there's something different about her...something I can't quite put my finger on that feels dangerous.

Before I've figured her out, snarls rip from the throats of the traitors and they lunge for us. The small yellow Wolf takes a second too long, and I'm mere feet from her before she's able to register my presence.

Kill. I must kill her. Stop the threat. Protect the pack.

Jaw wide and teeth ready to sink into her, she notices me just in time and jukes out of the way. I snap down on air and spin back on her just as she's snapping down on the end of my tail and pulling away with a mouth of black fur.

Fast. So fast.

Turning to face each other, she tries to convey something to me but the wall is up between our mental pathways. It's almost like she doesn't want to do this. Like she doesn't want to be here. Circling each other, I'm able to see other Wolves fighting in the background.

Rikon looks irritated as he stands next to his foe on the ground, dying with his throat ripped out. Fayez has a ruddy brown Wolf by the back of the neck. With a ripping sound and a loud yelp of pain, he rips the fur from the muscle halfway down the back of the traitor. I avert my eyes to avoid seeing what happens next.

Alaric is chest down on the ground with a Wolf standing over him, teeth sunk into the back of his neck. Black inky hate starts to seep into the edges of my vision, so close to unleashing itself to save my friend. Mere seconds

before I completely lose control, a white streak shoots across the battleground and plows into the side of the traitor, toppling him off Alaric.

Daciana.

She doesn't stop but instead circles back around to her own challenger, leaving Alaric to finish the job himself. But Daciana...she looks like hell burns within her black eyes as she makes her way back to her prey. That's what the traitor who challenges her is, even if he doesn't know it. He's prey, and she's going to feast on his heart tonight in victory.

I can't watch. I can never watch the woman who is like a mother to me kill with such viciousness it makes me wonder how she's not a hellhound sent above to punish the wicked.

The yellow Wolf challenging me stops her movement and turns to watch the battle. She's young, like me, maybe younger. She doesn't want this, doesn't want to kill. And if I'm being honest, I don't want to kill her. My brain works quickly. She could be useful.

Snapping at her, I draw her attention away from the battle and back to me. She's afraid but stands her ground. We dance around each other in a pattern of lunge and dodge for a few more minutes before I'm tired of playing games with her. With my next lunge, she dodges in exactly the same direction as she has the last few times, and I take the opportunity to pivot my body and knock her down with the weight of my frame.

Falling to her side, she flops for a moment, trying to gather her footing, but I'm on her. Teeth sunken into the side of her neck down to the bones in her jaw and the back of her skull, it's evident she is nothing to them if they forced her to come here. I can kill her now. I should kill her now.

But I won't.

With a loud warning snarl, I pull my teeth back from her flesh and step on her throat with one large paw in warning. If she moves, I'll kill her. If she submits, I'll let her live for now. Seeming to understand, she remains still beneath me.

The battle is almost over before me, only Reika and Fenris remain. She looks mostly unscathed. Blood has coagulated on her fur and the back of

her neck is healing quickly from his sneak attack. But Fenris seems to have taken quite the beating in the short time I've been distracted.

Crimson stains the ground around them. Bits of fur and flesh hang from various points on his body. His hind leg gapes open with muscles and sinew barely attached and bone fully exposed in places. Even with our advanced healing, there's no way for him to heal enough from those injuries to win. Reika turns away from him to give him a moment to collect himself before she's forced to finish a fight she didn't want.

Even with the knowledge that his life is forfeit at this point, his pride pushes him forward. Lunging, he goes for her nape while her back is turned, but she's wiser and faster.

With lightning speed, she sidesteps the attack. Fenris snaps down on empty air and slides through the bloody dirt, turning back to face her. But she's ready for him, ready to finish this.

Sliding forward, lowering her chest down to the ground, Reika lunges upward. Sharp teeth sink into Fenris's throat from below and blood sprays everywhere as he snarls and thrashes. A deep crunch follows a nauseating ripping sound, signifying the end.

Victoriously, the Alpha stands tall holding Fenris by his throat and makes a circle for all to see the once feared Wolf now reduced to nothing more than a rabbit in the mouth of a predator. There is no honor or glory in death, especially not when your entire pack is watching you fade away without a single care. Her message says what those in human form cannot hear.

Fuck with the Alpha and you'll meet the same fate.

Satisfied with her victory, Fenris's lifeless body is spat out on the ground with a sickening thud. I can't take my eyes off him. The larger than life, terrifying Wolf has been reduced to a bleeding heap of fur in a matter of seconds. All of the years I feared him and then hated him, the years he tormented the Reds with the utmost cruelty, and the thinly veiled threats and looks of derision towards our Alpha—finally, it's all over.

The cleanup crew moves in to take the bodies away, and I catch a glimpse of Daciana sinking her fangs through the torso of her prey. Quickly, I turn away. I've had enough fuel for my nightmares to last a lifetime. Exhaustion creeps in as my darkness slinks back into place and the bit of gold returns to my core.

And now—now all I want to do is sleep for days, if not eternity. But I can't. I must deal with my captive.

CHAPTER 15

SAMIRA

“What the fuck are we going to do with a captive? We should kill her and eat her heart.” Daciana isn’t amused with my logic of keeping the yellow Wolf alive.

The young woman on the floor between the warriors trembles. Reika and Rikon have taken their seats back on the dais, no wounds visible, looking more like they were on a romp in the forest than just fighting for their lives.

“I told you. She could have information. She might be more useful alive than dead. Besides, look at her. She’s not a fighter. Definitely not a threat.”

“It could be a distraction,” Fayez states quietly as he assesses her with the eyes of a battle-worn warrior.

“Or she could be a spy. Maybe they sent the small, weak one because they thought she had a chance of being taken captive instead of killed.” Alaric makes a lot of sense with his sudden bout of rare insight.

I snap my focus back to the small woman and run my eyes over her. He makes a helluva lot of sense. Bending down, I wrench her head back and expose her throat as my fangs grow. Wide eyes take in my anger, her trembles turning to entire body quakes.

“Are you here to spy on us, yellow Wolf? Lie and I’ll kill you slowly.” My own ignorance has me more angry than the actual possibility of her being a spy. I should have seen it, but her frailty clouded my vision.

“N-no. Not a spy.”

“Then why did they send you to participate in a coup?”

“Because I have a gift and they wanted me to use it on you all. They thought they’d win easily.”

“And what is this gift, yellow Wolf?”

“Foresight. I can see intentions and predict outcomes.”

We all gasp at the revelation of a Wolf openly admitting to having magick, but the Alpha interrupts as if she’s unfazed.

“And what exactly did you see happening with this coup, young one?” Reika booms from her throne.

“I saw us losing. I saw you capturing me,” she whispers softly to me. “And I saw you saving me from others like them. Keeping me safe,” she says over my shoulder to the Alpha.

“And why would I do that?” Reika scoffs.

“Because I am your granddaughter.”

The air is sucked out of the room, and my head spins. Silence stretches on with her panicked breathing being the only sound in my ears.

Granddaughter? How?

Aunt Daciana is the only living child of the Alphas, her twin dying before she produced any heirs. I’ve been raised as the only heir to a throne I’m not sure I want, groomed to be great and take over the pack when the Alphas are ready to pass it on. And here comes this woman who dares to try and lay claim to a family and legacy that belongs to me? A family and pack that I will gladly lay down my life to protect?

“She’s lying!” I sputter angrily. “Daciana has no children, and I’m the only child of Damon. It’s not possible.”

I look to Daciana and Reika for answers but only find sadness in their eyes.

My voice seizes in my throat, sound only escaping in a cracked whisper when I see their realization of lies and secrets finally catching up to them. "It's not possible, is it? Tell me the truth. Tell me you didn't keep this from me."

"Clear the room!" Reika orders. "Samira, Daciana, yellow Wolf, stay."

My head is spinning. I should kill this infiltrator. She's a spy. She's trying to worm her way into the family to take us down from the inside. Darkness tries to seep in and overtake my willpower, but I push it back down deep inside and lock it away.

Once we're alone, Reika appears over my shoulder as my grip tightens on the yellow Wolf's hair. She yelps in pain. Furious, I'm seconds from ripping her hair clean off her skull.

"Samira?" Reika speaks softly. "Granddaughter, let her go." A gentle hand tugs on my shoulder, forcing me to stand straight and release the spy. "Look at me, strong one."

Silver eyes meet mine when I turn, tears of anger welling and threatening to coat my cheeks.

"We have things to discuss. Come. Sit." Her voice is calm, soothing. Turning, she walks back up the dais and takes her seat. Rikon reaches over and clutches her hand, bringing it to his mouth to kiss her knuckles in encouragement. Grandmother motions for me to take a seat next to her, while Daciana stands with the yellow Wolf, exhaustion etched on her face.

She knows. They all know. Secrets are the downfall of families and civilizations, and my own family has been keeping something from me.

On shaky legs, I make my way to the seat at the right hand of the Alpha, my grandmother, the one I most look up to in the world, after my aunt. Tentatively, she reaches out and clutches my hand in her much larger one. Turning it over in hers, she looks at my palm and then flips it back over to assess the other side.

“You are strong, Samira. So much stronger than anyone knows. And now, I must tell you something hard that I need you to keep a secret. Not for me but for the betterment of the pack. Can you do that?”

Throat dry, I swallow what feels like glass and choke out a confirmation. “Y-yes. I can do that, Alpha.”

“Not Alpha. Grandmother. I need us to be just grandmother and grandchild right now.”

“Okay.” My heart beats wildly in my chest like the wings of a tiny bird are trying to rip through my ribcage.

“Long ago, Samira, your father Damon chose to live apart from the pack so he could live his life how he wanted. He tried so hard to fit in with the rest of us and follow our laws, but at some point he realized his path was not the one we had planned for him. So, Damon left us and went in search of his own truth.”

She takes a deep breath and looks to Rikon for comfort before continuing. Turning back to me, she appears almost forlorn, hesitant to reveal what came next.

“I need you to listen without overreacting. Do I have your word, Samira?”

“Yes, grandmother,” I whisper, completely entranced.

Setting her jaw, she continues. “Damon went off into the forest in search of something that called him, and he found it. *Her*. He found *her*.”

“Her? Yellow Wolf? That’s not possible. She’s too young.”

“No, not yellow Wolf. You can drop the act. We’re aware of the drunken conversation your aunt had with you when you were much too young for those truths. You know he wasn’t killed in battle.”

I nod and turn my eyes to the small one, and it all clicks into place when I see the resemblances. “Ah. So then, this yellow Wolf really is some long lost child? You could have told me and saved yourself the guilt and lies.”

“We couldn’t, but she’s forced our hand so now we have no choice. It’s not the yellow Wolf’s existence, Samira. It’s her blood. Perhaps you should

tell her,” she says, turning to address the young woman.

A timid voice answers, barely audible. “My father was Damon, the Wolf, and your father as well. My mother was ...” she pauses and takes a deep breath, expelling it loudly. Voice quavering, she rushes out the last bit before she loses her courage. “My mother was a Red. A true Red.”

“And I killed her,” Reika whispers to my side.

“And I ate her heart,” Daciana says with a slight hint of remorse.

I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe and I can’t feel. There’s only numbness. The history of our people rushes through my mind. We don’t mix with Reds because of the curse. Reds infect us and we die painfully while they live on. They’re a disease. That’s what I’ve always been told, what I’ve always believed...until Rose.

“How—” I swallow. “How long did our father live after he and your mother came together?”

“Years,” she whispers. “He lived for years.”

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat and push forward. I need to know the whole truth. “And what truly killed him?” My voice is barely audible now. I’m terrified of the answer and what it will mean to everything I’ve been taught, everything I know about my own people.

“Truly, it was his broken heart. He couldn’t live without his true mate. When she killed my mother, she killed him right along with her. She killed her own son the day she ruined my life and damned my future.” The vitriol is barely contained in her voice.

It’s a lie. It’s all a lie. It has to be!

Turning towards my grandmother, I silently plead for answers.

Tears stain her face, something I’ve never seen in the strongest being I know.

“When I found out he mated with a Red behind my back, I was furious. I thought she was a death sentence to him. I thought she was a disease waiting to strike him down. Knowing he was on limited time, I hunted her

down outside of the human village where they shared a home. I waited until she was alone and killed her in a fury for the imminent death of my only son. I didn't know about the child until we went back and found his body the following year. Until we saw the signs of a toddler and found the note he left for me."

Yellow Wolf perks up at the mention of a note. "A note? What did it say?"

"You did this to me. For nothing. It's all a lie." Reika recites from memory and bows her head in true remorse, tears dripping onto her chest.

"Where was the baby?" I ask.

The yellow Wolf speaks up from her broken hearted puddle on the floor. Wiping snot from her nose, she reveals her secrets, too. "He gave me to a human woman to raise. An ally of the Wolf, she knew my parents' secret and helped keep it hidden. He thought I would be safe with her. If he only knew the cruelty that lay in store for me at the hands of my new mother." Fire burns in her eyes at the mention of her human mother, something I store in the back of my mind to learn more about later.

"And why are you here now? Why not come before all of this carnage?" Suspicion edges my voice. I don't trust her. The timing is too convenient.

"The human woman who raised me got sick. Some disease had her in its grasp, making her age and wither at an unnatural pace. It was nature's way of getting justice, if you ask me. In the end, she got the last word when she sold me to Fenris and his pack. They were going to use me and then kill me until they found out who I was and what I could do. I became a tool for them, nothing more."

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Fuck, indeed," grandmother agrees.

"So, what now? I'm tired and ready to wash the blood and flesh from my body." Daciana looks unamused with the entire situation. More annoyed by her forced presence than the newly found family member at her feet.

"Now, she needs someone to watch her until we know we can trust her." Rikon speaks up from his silent position, clutching tightly to my

grandmother's hand.

"And who the fuck is going to do that?" Daciana spats.

"You, of course," he smiles back.

"Fuck." Grandmother, Daciana, yellow Wolf, and I all mutter in unison.



I hate washing day. I hate it with a passion, but it's a necessity and my turn to handle my blood family's clothing.

Daciana has forced me to drag along the yellow Wolf, so at least it'll be quicker with two sets of hands.

Maybe I'll have time to check on Rose.

I haven't let myself think of her since I left her and shattered both of our hearts so many weeks ago, but now with everything fucked up, she's all I can think about. The memory of her scent soothes the angry and confused beast within me begging to be let out for a run or a hunt.

"Hey, you! Hurry up. It's going to be dark in a few hours, and I'd like to hit the tavern before lights out."

"I have a fucking name, asshole."

"And?"

"And since I'm family and I'm going to be staying around for a while you might as well learn it."

I hurrumph in annoyance at her.

"Aureadna. My name is Aureadna. Auri for short."

"Okay, and?"

“And call me by my fucking name or I’ll conveniently forget yours, asshole.”

“Ooohhh, I’m so worried about you forgetting my name. What ever shall I do?”

“You tell me, asshole.”

“Stop calling me asshole.”

“Whatever you say, asshole.”

I sighed loudly. “You are so annoying. Like a child really. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Maybe,” she smirked.

“Fine. You win for now, Auri.”

A large smile spreads across her face as she washes faster. I guess I have no choice but to try and get along with her. Even if she is a spy, it’s probably better to keep my enemies close.

CHAPTER 16

ROSE

Weeks have passed since she left me and life resumed mostly as it had been before her. Visits to grandma's have been without my shadow stalking from the trees, and even if we can't be together, I miss knowing she was there.

Terrified before I knew her intentions but still somehow comforted by her presence, now all I feel is a hollow ache deep inside of my heart. I know she's alive. I can feel her through the connection that formed when my golden magick flowed into her heart. Mostly, she seems happy but every now and then her confusion and desperation shoot down our bond and reverberate within me.

Watching Fern grow with the life of her first child, I feel even more alone in a world that thinks I'm a curse to be wiped out. I don't feel dangerous or evil. Now that my powers have come in, I feel more in tune with nature. I feel like I have a purpose and that's to heal those around me, but how can I do that when allowing my magick to be free is a death sentence?

In May's writings, she said magick is the savior. I've waited patiently for grandma to explain that to me or guide me, but she's been distant and not even written her standard letter to tell us how she's feeling lately.

The last list was roughly scrawled in a barely legible handwriting. It makes me fear she's near the end and is distancing herself to make her passing easier on us.

Standing on the cliffside across from her isolation island, I stare into the darkened window impatiently waiting for the basket to make its return journey.

"Please, please, let there be some answers this time. Please." I beg and plead to the sky, hoping the Gods are up there listening today, hoping someone is listening.

It feels like an eternity before the pulley system starts to move, and when it does the movements are strong but jerky. Swaying from side to side, the basket looks like it's about to overturn, and my heart seizes in my chest. Hope lies within. The last shred of hope I have for answers to my magickal questions.

Finally...finally, it reaches me. Ripping the basket down, I pull out the linen to reveal a small piece of paper. Nervous fingers shake as I open it and continue my silent prayers. Peeling open the final fold, my heart sinks when I find another supply list and nothing more.

I turn towards her hut with hurt and fury burning in my eyes, the tears falling in hot torrents down my face.

"Grandma! Why won't you answer my questions?" I scream as loud as I can, hoping my voice carries across the wind and angry ocean. "Write me back! Answer me! I'm not leaving until you do! I'll sit here all night!"

Silence.

"If you won't answer me, then I'm coming over there! Disease be damned!!!"

Stepping up to the edge, I lay on my belly, back to the ocean, and start to search for a foothold to climb down. A sudden movement on the rope stops me, like she's making it bob up and down in an answer to my threat. Curious, I stand back up and walk over to inspect it only to have the basket zoom back towards the hut.

It's only inside of the window for a few seconds before it's shooting back across the ocean at me. Anxiously, I catch it and look inside to find a thick envelope weighed down by a large rock.

"This is it. Finally," I exhale. Impatiently, I rip open the envelope and pull out pages of parchment with her perfect handwriting. Gone is the shaky, illegible script of a woman dying. The ink is perfect and the words are level, like she took the utmost care and thought in the contents of the pages.

Taking a deep breath, I sit down on a nearby boulder, calm my shaky hands and read everything that will change my life.

Dearest granddaughter,
There are some stories that are not
mine to tell. Some truths that I've
kept secret for my entire life, but
now it seems like my condition will
overtake me and I'll move on to my
next life, leaving you and everyone I
love behind. With my absence, I fear
the stories of our people and the real
reason for our castigation will be lost.

So here it is. I'm sorry.

Death during childbirth is uncommon but not unheard of. Stories were passed down of the death of the Alphas' daughter during childbirth. They say the magick ripped through her and diseased her body so greatly that it melted her away before everyone's eyes. They tell us she was perfectly healthy until the Elders' son put a child in her, and then she slowly started to wither and left this world before the child was born.

They write our histories of the death of the most powerful Alpha daughter, the grief of the Elder son, and the execution of him and many of our people that followed. You know that time as The Burning Times.

But what no one knows is, I was there. For hundreds of years I've lived in the world of magick and power, until the grief overtook the Alphas so greatly that they burned all of our gifted kind and shackled those who were left with biased laws.

You're probably asking yourself how it is that I've lived so long. That reason belongs only to my sweet, selfless mother. She was a gifted Red with beautiful magick that flowed through her. With the power of foresight, she saw what was coming and sent me on a false errand to the human village.

On my journey home, I could see the black smoke billowing in the air. Hiding, I crept through brush until I saw what they were doing to our most powerful

people, and upon realizing why my mother sent me away, I chose to hide amongst the humans and live a human life.

Time passed, everyone around me aged but I didn't. I watched everyone I loved die during The Burning Times, and then everyone who was left wither and die with age. And yet, it was as if I was frozen in time, barely aging. For generations, I hid and watched, waiting for the tides to turn and the Reds to

shine again. But as you know, that has yet to happen.

To have no choice but to watch the world pass and be surrounded by imminent death—well, I wish that on no one. I never knew nor felt true happiness until the day I met your grandfather. A wonderful human, kind and caring, generous and thoughtful, he was who my body had been frozen in time for.

And so, love changed me.

I aged with him, grew and bore his children, and stood by his side when he left this world as a fulfilled old man. Seeing the spirit leave his body did something to me. Grief overtook me and something inside of me shifted. I started to change into something or someone I didn't recognize.

My magick came in full force, more powerful than anything I'd ever experienced, but something else came along with it.

I've asked myself over and over again why I was frozen and unchanged for so long and have come up with very few answers. The only reasoning must be my difference from other Reds. You see, my granddaughter, my greatest most powerful pride in this world, I am a product of Wolf and Red. The man who raised me fell in love with my mother while she was round with me in her belly, and knowing I was not his child he still chose to claim me as his own

and raise me the same as my siblings
who came after.

I'm not a monster or damnable creation,
as the Wolves would have labeled me.

I'm simply me. Iris Riverbourne,
mother, grandmother, Red, and Wolf.

Pain and grief do strange things to a
person. I'm not angry at Reika or Rikon
for their reaction to the death of their
most special daughter. Nor am I angry
at the burning of our people and being
forced to live the beginning of my life in
a lie.

I'm not even angry at the
immeasurable grief I've been forced to
endure through my hundreds of years.
Anger has no place here, only pity and
forgiveness.

Remember that, my dear. Remember
that anger has no place no matter how
hard it tries to pierce through your flesh
and enter your golden heart. Show them
love. Show them mercy. Show them we
are not dangerous with our magick
flowing freely through you. Show them
love can and will conquer all.

I'm not long for our world, Rose. I'll be gone soon, but you—you must live on. You are the savior. Free them all and restore what once was between our creatures.

Peace.

I love you, eternally. Through this life and the next.

Grandma

My breath has seized up in my chest, and the ground threatens to crack open beneath my feet and suck me into a black abyss. What did I just read? Grandma is a Red-Wolf hybrid? And now she's dying?

"This can't be true." Pushing up from the mossy rock beneath me, I storm back towards her isolation hut. There's not a single bone in my body that believes she's a damnation or that we are unable to cure her. I have so many questions.

If she's dying from the shedding disease, does that mean all Red-Wolf hybrids will follow the same fate? Is her condition a side effect or a happenstance? And what does it mean if a Wolf and Red love each other but are physically unable to reproduce? Are we still dangerous together? Are we dangerous together period or is it all a lie?

The hut comes into view, all foreboding and silent beyond the angry waves crashing on the rocks below. There's no way I'm going to be able to cross the water on a boat without being smashed to death on those jagged points. Taking a deep breath, I know the only solution to getting to grandma, but I'm wary to risk it.

Reaching out my senses, I search for Wolf energy watching me but come back empty. She's not here. Samira is far away in the mountains now with other Wolf auras, darkness with a glowing center of gold. I'm alone, finally, though her absence makes my heart ache in my chest. But I know why she's staying away. Our love is deadly if anyone finds out.

Magick pushes from my fingertips downward and from the soles of my feet into the ground of the cliff I stand upon. I feel the water, the fish, the tiny creatures clinging to the rocks below. It'd be so easy to pull the life force from them and absorb it into my body but such a shame. Beauty exists in places where we least expect to see it, and today I'm choosing to see it in the tiniest of creations.

Push. Pull. Push. Pull. The waves crash and rescind, crash and rescind. Inhaling deeply, I force energy out of my body and down into the water, willing it to stop.

It's almost too easy. I'm too strong now, and the waves stop as if frozen. Carefully, I climb down the thirty or so feet of the cliff face and stand on a

rock parallel to the water that leads to grandma's hut.

"Now or never, I guess," I mumble to myself.

Jumping in, I swim the twenty yards to her little island and climb up the rock face. Rarely used muscles scream in protest from movements I haven't made since I was a child. Digging my nails into jagged outcroppings, I search for purchase and sigh a breath of relief when I find it and hoist myself out of the water. Climbing becomes a pattern of sinking my nails in somewhere and hunting for a foot placement in what feels like hours of exertion.

By the time my feet touch to the soft, green grass of her garden I'm spent. Blood drips from my destroyed nails, but I barely notice. Instead, I'm fully focused on the tiny hut before me with white smoke piping from the chimney and Wolfsbane planted in thick flowerbeds.

"Grandma? It's Rose. I'm here to talk to you." Excitedly, I call out but receive a less than welcoming response.

"Go away! It's not safe here!"

"Now, I don't believe that one bit. I need to talk to you. It's serious. Give me five minutes."

After a long pause, she finally answers me. "Fine!" she shouts back. "Five minutes, but you don't step more than two feet inside the front door threshold."

"Deal."

The door creaks with years of use and saltwater air destruction. A familiar smell assaults me on the ocean breeze, signaling there's a Wolf nearby, and I go on high alert, pulling in my magick and locking it down.

"Grandma?"

"Over here, my dear."

I'm nervous to see her on her deathbed, but I owe her everything so I push forward. Stepping two feet towards the bed, I can make out gleaming, large eyes assessing me in the darkness. My body freezes in shock.

“Grandma, your eyes are so big?”

“The better to see you with, my dear.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I step another two feet forward and her bright white teeth shine like diamonds. “Oh, grandma!” A sob escapes me, a single tear tracks down my face. Throat tight with emotion, I choke out my next words through a restrained sob. “Your teeth. They’re so big!”

“The better to eat with, my dear.”

Another step and finally—finally I see the fur and long nose she’s been hiding from us all. Coupled with the smell of Wolf all around, it’s not hard to figure out what happened. A smile spreads across my face while a river of tears laced with relief drips from my chin.

“Oh, grandma, your big nose and furry face—”

“The better to hide from you, my dear.” Her voice is low and a soft sob escapes her.

Emotion coats my throat and makes it tight and my voice thick. “But why? Why didn’t you tell us? We could have helped you.”

“No. No one could help me. Nature always perseveres, Rose. And this—” Grandma steps into the light on four legs, revealing herself in Wolf form. Bright green eyes glow surrounded by reddish-brown fur with streaks of gray throughout, but her essence, my grandma’s essence is glowing from within. “---this, Rose, is the real me now. I suppressed transforming into my true self for years. I tried to cure myself, thinking I was an abomination, cursed, dangerous. But here I am, and here you are.”

It’s then that I realize I’ve been hearing her this entire time without a word being spoken from her muzzle. ‘For Wolves are unable to speak the words of man.’ The words in May’s journal from her brother’s release by the Alphas. His failed attempts at connecting with them were because Reds cannot hear the Wolf voice, but I can hear grandma. And now I understand.

“Yes, grandma. Here I am. And though your mouth does not move and voice does not come from your throat, I hear you loud and clear inside here and here.” I tap my head and my heart, her eyes watching intently

with moisture brimming in them and threatening to overflow. Even now, when she has been so isolated and felt so alone going through this transformation, she is trying to maintain her strength for me. “We are the same, you and I. Red and Wolf. Magick and nature. We are the same. Don’t you think it’s about time to put all of this fear behind us and live in peace?”

She straightens up at my words, her chest filling with what I can only guess is pride. “I do.”

“Then let’s get the feck outta here, grandma. We have a village and a pack to unite.”

CHAPTER 17

SAMIRA

The forest whips by me in vibrant shades of reds, oranges, and yellows. Strong paws pound into the ground as I try to outrun the annoying shadow who's fallen too far behind. I just need a few minutes to myself, and since Auri came to live with our pack I haven't had it. There's been no time to deal with the emotions flooding me that came with my new power or deadliness of my first and only love.

Love.

Skidding to a halt, I'm frozen in shock. I've never thought those words about someone who wasn't family, nor have I ever felt that way romantically. Rose has figuratively and literally worked her way into my heart, and it was so natural, so right, that I didn't even realize it happened.

I love her so entirely and completely, so unquestioningly.

Both happiness and great sadness hit me simultaneously.

"What is it? Why'd you stop?" Auri pants from behind me.

I can't let her see me like this. I have to suppress it. Taking a deep breath, I push down my feelings and shove them deep inside in a little box in my heart and lock it tight.

Glancing over my shoulder, I give her a smirk. "Just waiting on you to catch up. Can't let one of these larger predators out here find your tiny ass and think you're a snack."

“Pffttt! Bitch, I’m a snack all right, and if one of these big boys is hungry he can eat this ass first.”

Involuntarily, I wretch and almost lose my breakfast. “Ew, ew, ew. Just no.”

“What? I’m a woman. I have needs, and I needs to get some action on my neglected pu—”

“If you finish that sentence I’ll push you off the mountain,” I interrupt loudly. “I really, really don’t want that mental image, little sister.”

“You really, really need to get laid. Quit being so uptight. Ya know, Alaric is cute and I see the way he looks at you when you’re not looking.”

“Alaric and I are just friends.”

“But he wants more. I think you should give him more, a lot more.” The annoying little yellow Wolf actually winks at me as I balk at the idea of giving anything to anyone.

“Pass. Not interested.” Turning away, I continue our run only slightly slower so she won’t get so far behind. I wasn’t joking when I said a larger predator might make her a snack. A lot of the pack hates her for being part of Fenris’s attempted coup. They don’t trust outsiders, but they really don’t trust her. And because of that any one of them would gladly kill her and take out the perceived threat.

Thankfully, she runs behind me in silence for a few minutes which allows me to gather my thoughts and focus on all of the tasks I’ve given myself. The pack is facing a large number of births in the blooming season, too many for us to manage on our own. We need help but have limited options.

Human midwives can help us, but most of them are too afraid to come into Wolf territory for very long. The few humans who do are trusted traders and crafters from families we’ve worked with for generations. Only one option remains and I’m hesitant to think it much less say it aloud.

Reds.

If we ask them for help and lose a mother or child, fear will spread through the pack like wildfire and the Red midwives won’t make it home alive. Worse, the pack could take it out on the entire Red village, putting Rose in danger.

No. I won’t say it or think it again. We’ll have to find another solution.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about so intently, big sister?”

I jolt at Auri’s voice. “Shit! I forgot you were there.”

“Thinkin’ that hard, huh? You’re a terrible Wolf. I could’ve been one of those big predators come to eat your ass or something.”

“Ugh! Enough of the ass eating, you menace!”

“Fine,” she snaps back. “But it might help loosen your tense ass up,” she mumbles under her breath.

“I heard that.”

“Oh good, your ears are working again.”

“Fuck you!”

“Hard pass!” Auri’s laughter peels through my thoughts and her Wolf chuckle bounces off the trees.

Grumbling, I roll my eyes at my constant source of annoyance. “I hate you, some days.”

“Yeah but you’re starting to love me most days, so I count it as a win.”

She’s right. I’ve come to love her like the annoying little sister she is, if only I could teach her some manners and shut her up.



“Samira!” Aunt Daciana’s voice booms from outside of my cabin and interrupts the few hours of restful sleep I’ve gotten in the last few days.

My body is stiff and my head pounds from weeks of combat training and laboring in an unsuccessful attempt to wear myself out. The hard work has made me tired but not tired enough to keep Rose out of my dreams.

“Samira, come out here or I’m coming in!” She sounds pissed, but I’m not really sure why.

“Come in already! Quit yelling at my door!”

The front door slams open just as I'm swinging my legs over the side of the bed and making contact with the floor. I can still feel the fibers of the wood beneath my feet, but there's more to it since I came back from my near death experience. Now, I can see the life of the tree the wood came from. Like the tree's lifetime flashes in my head. Learning to silence the strange new power has been a challenge in my Wolf form. It's like that gift belongs to my animal side. In human form, it shows up in a rare flicker.

Arms stretched upward, I flex my fingers and elongate my spine. Muscles and sinew pop and bones creak in my body from being still for more than a couple of hours. I needed the sleep. Hell, I still need more sleep, but Daciana seems to have other plans as she storms in my room and halts with her hands on her hips.

"I was sleeping. Could whatever this is have waited?"

"No. And it's late morning. Why are you still sleeping?"

"Not 'still' sleeping. I just got to sleep a few hours ago."

"Ah, I see. Well, sorry about waking you. I know you barely sleep since you came back to us."

"Barely, yes." Standing, I pull on my thick work pants and slide my feet into dirty work boots. "Now, what's so urgent that it couldn't wait a few more hours?"

"Two things. One, you need to come with me to a meeting in the hall about our upcoming childbirth problem. Two, your sister is making me insane with her nonstop talking and questions. The girl doesn't know when to shut up. She keeps talking about someone eating her ass or something. I just can't. Take her back."

"Ha! Now you know what I've been dealing with. She's a nympho or something. I'd be surprised if she didn't end up with her own harem of males once they all stop wishing for her death."

Brushing past Daciana, I stalk towards the kitchen, hunting for coffee. Finding my prey, I grab the coffee pot off the burner and peer inside only to find a congealed sludge. "Well, fuck. Guess I'm ready for this meeting. You don't happen to have a cup of strong coffee lying around, do you?"

"Afraid not."

"Useless," I tease with a smirk. Grabbing my work jacket, I throw it on over my white tank top and quickly twist my hair into a bun and secure it. "Let's get this

meeting over with then.”

We walk together in mostly silence towards the meeting hall. Daciana’s presence is a comfort. She doesn’t overshare, pry too much, or nag. Mostly, she observes with those dangerous black eyes. I suspect she sees a lot more than she lets on, and I’m grateful for her not bringing things up that I clearly don’t want to talk about.

“Any thoughts on what to do about our predicament?” I ask.

“You and I both know there are only two options. One is unlikely. The other is highly dangerous.”

“Yeah, I know. Maybe we can learn from one of them and handle it on our own.”

She scoffs and shakes her head. “You think the humans want to be that close to us? I mean, sure the ones we know are comfortable around us, but their midwives have refused us in the past. Nothing has changed. It’s worth asking, but I’m not optimistic. Besides, we’d still need a few of them to supervise in case something went really wrong. You can’t learn lifetimes of experience with a few months of training.”

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. What about the Reds, then?” My voice chokes on ‘Reds’ and I try to brush it off and pretend to clear phlegm from my throat.

Daciana arches an eyebrow at me but lets it go. “They might be willing to help us, but it’s a huge risk to them. The majority of the pack won’t like them here regardless of the reason. Unlike last time when they came in secret and stayed mostly isolated to your cabin, this time they would have free reign of our community. A lot could go wrong.”

Flashes of my nightmares assault me. Rose laying dead in the mud, her throat ripped out, blood pooled around her lifeless, pale body. Crimson Valley in flames. Reds running from burning huts only to be caught in the foaming jaws of vengeful Wolves.

Screaming. So much screaming.

Darkness squeezes my heart and my fingers begin to tingle as I try to fight my way out of the mental assault. A warm hand wraps around mine and pulls me to a stop, Daciana coming into focus in front of me.

Worry lines her face. “You okay, Sammie?”

I can't tell her. I can't tell anyone. Shaking out of my brain fog, I plaster a fake smile on my face and lie. "Yeah, I'm good. Just need some coffee and food, I guess."

"Come on, girl." She keeps hold of my hand and pulls me toward the pub. "Let's get you some food before we go to this meeting. I need your brain to be working, not wandering."

She's right. I need to be fully present. If this meeting is anything like I'm expecting, the solution that I'm dreading will outrage a lot of the pack and the family will need me to help be a calming voice of reason.



Dread and hopelessness fill me at the thought of Rose or her people being in danger because they want to help us. Hell, I don't even know if they'll go for it but more than likely they will. I'm surrounded in the meeting hall by a majority of my pack who believe the Reds are dangerous and a disease. They're calm as they listen to the problem at hand, but soon they'll be in an uproar at the solution I know the Alphas will deliver.

"Pack, as your longest reigning Alpha, I call you here with joyous news. This blooming season the pack is expecting the largest birth I've ever seen."

Loud cheers erupt from everyone, the loudest being the mothers and fathers in the front rows.

Reika's warm eyes look down upon them from her dais. "You, my beautiful life givers, have brought so much happiness and excitement to the pack. More than I can remember. Soon, the village will be full of joy and wonder, innocence and hope. You are carrying our future in your wombs. May the moons bless you all with healthy babes and fast healing."

More cheers erupt. Reika stands and steps around her table to stand at the front of the dais. She's composed in her leader role. The ability to be one face in front of the pack and be someone different in private is something I respect. She plays both roles well.

“Now, my pack, I’ve called this meeting to discuss logistics. Let us talk of the problem at hand with so many births. Crafts and trades will need to be tripled, so I’m trusting you all to rely on our human allies for those things we are unable to make ourselves.” She’s nervous. It’s a tell only those of us who know her closely can see, but it’s there. A slight tap tap of her pinky finger while her hands are interlaced in front of her. With a deep breath, she steadies herself and speaks the words that will lead us into a furious debate. “But, that’s not the problem. You see, with so many childbirths expected at the same time, we can’t expect the few in our pack who have basic knowledge of midwifery to handle such a daunting task alone. We must reach outside of the pack for help to ensure the safe and healthy delivery of our babies and the health of our mothers.”

The room is silent for a moment before one of the mothers in the front row speaks up. “So, what about the humans? Surely they have midwives who can help us.”

“The humans are mostly afraid of us. I’m sorry to say our innate Wolf tempers are legendary among their tales. Only those who know us and trade with us regularly are our true allies.”

“You can order them to help us.” A deep voice of one of the fathers bellows from the front row.

“I could, but they don’t have to listen. The humans are not under our control. Remember, even though they may not see it this way, they are our allies and without them we would be struggling for much needed supplies. We have a good relationship with them that we don’t want to risk tarnishing.”

The same father stands and speaks again, pressing his view on the issue. “It doesn’t matter. These are our children. Force them to help us or face the consequences. Remind them that we took care of the Reds so we can do the same to them.”

Reika looks down upon the man with understanding eyes, but her resolution on the topic is clear before she speaks it. “I understand your fear for your children, but we will not force the humans to do anything. The negative impact to our pack if we lose the allies we have with them would be detrimental to all of us. All of us.” She stresses her final words causing the man to sit down and speak no more.

“What are we to do then, Alpha?” a sobbing mother asks. “I had a hard birth last time. The babe and I almost didn’t make it. What if the child starts to come while our midwives are with another mother? Are my baby and I to die this

time?” Some of the other mothers crowd around her and her mate, comforting them and whispering words of encouragement.

My heart hurts for her. To have the joyous occasion of a new baby to look forward to only to be told the risks are much higher than what she thought—well, that’s not something I ever want to feel but can still imagine the pain she’s going through.

The pack is silent as Reika paces back and forth on the dais, carefully weighing her next words. “Pack, you now know the predicament we find ourselves in. We need experienced midwives who can not only handle difficult births but handle a large amount of births. We need midwives experienced in herbal healing, tinctures, and remedies. There will be plenty of family and pack to help afterward, but leading up to and during there are immeasurable risks that our pack is not equipped to handle.”

“So what do we do, Alpha?” shouts an older female from the back row.

“There’s only one thing to do, and before I say the words I want to ask you all to control your emotions and hear me out.”

A grumble of agreement reverberates throughout the pack.

“Pack, we must ask the Reds for help.”

Agreement broken, a loud chorus of yelling breaks out all over the hall.

“NO!!!!”

“They’re a curse!”

“Disease!”

“They’ll kill us all!”

Reika stands there for a moment letting them all get their anger out, her own warring within her. I’m watching her intently as the pack carries on yelling like she’s not the Alpha, not the one who makes the important decisions for us all, not the one who’s shed her blood during coups and battles to protect them. In a blur, Rikon appears at her side, his large hand entwining in hers and stands next to her in solidarity, facing the pack.

They both let it go on for a few more minutes before Rikon gives Reika’s hand an almost imperceptible squeeze in a silent signal to her.

With a deep and powerful command, Reika enforces her Alpha control over everyone. “ENOUGH!”

The room falls deathly silent and everyone stares up at her.

“NOW SIT!”

They all listen and sit in unison.

“Pack, I am the Alpha. This is not up for debate. I’ve weighed our options and this is the only solution that makes sense. Now, listen to what I’m telling you and listen well. The magick within the Reds no longer exists. They are not a threat to any of us. What they do have is experience and generational knowledge. The Reds have midwives who’ve successfully delivered babies under the most dangerous of conditions. Even the humans have called on them for help. I wouldn’t put any of you or your mothers and babies in danger if I believed them to be capable of harming us. The disease and the threat that was once within the Reds is gone. As your Alpha, I have deemed them safe and therefore you will not harm a single hair on the head of any Red that comes into this village. The midwives will have free reign of anything they need. They will work alongside and teach our own the complexities of difficult childbirths and how to heal sick mothers afterward. This is a joyous time, but it calls for measures we’ve never had to take. I do this for you, my pack. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to obey. Anyone who does not follow these orders will face consequences I don’t wish to delve into. Trust me, pack. Trust your Alpha to take care of you, like I always have.”

Most of the pack bow their heads in supplication, but a few stare at the Alpha like she’s just spoken blasphemy. Deeply engrained hate is a hard thing to overcome. I only hope we’re able to do so before the blooming season is upon us and the Reds walk around freely in a place that’s hated them for generations.

CHAPTER 18

ROSE

“Rose, dear! Come along!” Mother’s voice calls to me from the front door interrupting my attempt to sneak off for some light reading at grandma’s hut. She’s been back with us for a long time, telling the village that she healed herself but is still too weak to walk amongst us. Really, she’s still trying to gain control of her Wolf form that constantly wants to be let out.

Abruptly, I halt my steps and turn back to her. She has that damn knowing look on her face. I don’t know why I try to hide things from her.

I beam at her, wide-eyed and innocent, forcing the damn role I have to play for anyone outside who may be paying attention. I really want to be alone and loathe who they’ve forced me to be at this moment.

“Come in the house, dear.”

The moment I step through the doorway a weight lifts from my shoulders when I’m able to drop the facade. Father and Bear greet me, sitting at the table. Mother motions for me to sit with them. Remembering the last time we were together at the table like this brings back bad memories. It was the day my grandma left and isolated herself on the island.

Heart beating wildly in my chest, I start to panic while my mind races through all of the possibilities. Fern? Could something be wrong with Fern or her baby? Could someone have seen me use my powers?

Calm eyes meet mine when I look at my father, his hand reaching out and patting me reassuringly. Taking a deep breath, I try to ground myself and center my energy that's perceptibly shooting through my body.

Bear is doing what he always does. Obliviously playing with a toy on the table and making the maximum amount of noise. And completely covered in dirt from head to toe. I have no idea where he gets off to during the day, but he always turns up like this just before supper causing mother to balk and send him off to wash in the river.

"Bear. Shush now," mother chides with twinkling eyes. "Now, I called you all to a family meeting because I have exciting news and some difficult news. What do you want to hear first?"

"Bad," we all say in unison.

"Okay, well the bad news is the Wolves have upped their herb and tincture supply needs, so we'll have to work hard for the next few weeks." We all groan in unison. "But the good news is it's because they are having a surplus of babies and need our help with midwifing in the blooming season."

My jaw drops as my brain works in overdrive trying to process how that could be good news. "Mother, more Wolves is not good news. Being forced to be near the Wolves and help deliver their babies is also not good news. They already think we're some kind of a disease. What if something happens to a mother or baby when we're there? They'll think we did something and execute us."

"No, they won't. The Alpha has requested our support and ensured our safety. We're going to do everything we can to help them in goodwill. We help them and they'll owe us. It's the smart thing to do."

Standing up abruptly, my chair topples over behind me with a loud clatter. "Bullshit! The smart thing to do is tell them to go fuck themselves, mother! They'll kill us and not think twice about it. Reds don't walk into the literal Wolf den and walk out. Everyone knows that. What does grandma say to all of this?"

“Rose, don’t talk to your mother that way. Now sit down, darlin’.” My father’s voice is soothing but not enough to make me rethink my position.

“Rose, listen to me. Grandma agrees it’s the smart thing to do. She trusts the Alphas word just as I do. We will do this because it’s the right thing to do. I trusted you with the sick one, and everything worked out. Now, I need you to trust that I know what I’m getting us into. I’ll need you to run the household and take care of your father and brother while I’m away. There are a lot of babies coming. I don’t know how long Fern and I will be gone.”

“No! I won’t risk Fern. She’s newly married and will be round with her own child at that point. If someone is going to help you, it’ll be me.” A thought forms in my head instantly at how I can move about freely without attracting suspicion. “Most of the Wolves have never seen me, anyways. I can pretend to be her. I’ll go with you and she’ll stay here and help father and brother. It’ll be fine.”

“But your hair—”

I cut her off before she can give me any more excuses. “Will be hidden behind a wig. I’ll make sure it’s secured and cover it with one of the scarves we usually wear for childbirths. It’ll be fine,” I reassure her in my most soothing voice, but at the same time I’m also trying to talk myself into it.

Walking into the Wolves den was not how I expected this to go. My mind drifts off as mother and father start to make plans for the tinctures.

And all I can see are gold eyes that can destroy me.



Standing in my grandma’s kitchen, I pace around raving like a lunatic about the idiocy we’ve agreed to embark on.

“And I can’t believe you agreed to this! They could kill us all if something goes wrong. Not to mention, this could draw more attention to us and reveal you. Since the Proctor has been gone, you’re safe hiding in plain sight, but what if this makes them start the inspections again? What if I can’t control–” I stop abruptly, realizing I’m about to make a huge mistake and reveal my secrets. “--my hatred. What if I can’t control my hatred?”

“Child, you don’t really hate them. If you did, you’d hate me as well.”

“You’re different. You’re my blood.”

“Yes, and your blood has Wolf in it, too. So do you hate yourself?”

That gives me pause. I hadn’t thought of it that way. My blood is Red and Wolf. What does that mean? Will I end up like grandma and eventually shift into a Wolf? I already have my magick, so will I be both?

A magickal Wolf. The mental image of a Wolf zapping power from its paws makes me smirk and breaks some of my tension away for a moment.

“Well, do you?” She pushes me for an answer, and I don’t hesitate this time in supplying the truth.

“No. I don’t hate myself. In fact, for the most part I think very highly of myself these days.”

“Oh, really? That’s good to hear, sweetheart. What changed?”

“A lot changed while you were away. A lot I can’t talk about. I want to learn more about our people and our magick. I have so many questions. You have no idea how relieved I am that you’re not sick and are finally home with us.”

“I’m happy to be home, but there are many risks with me being here. Just like there are many risks with you being here. Now is a time when we must trust and lean on each other.” She looks over her glasses at me, ones that I now realize she only wears for show since her Wolf has given her bestial vision far beyond anything a human or Red could have.

“Risks with me being here? No one knows about my red hair. I’m perfectly safe.”

“Rose, let’s stop pretending. I know. I’ve known for longer than you have.”

It’s then that something she wrote in her letter hits me with realization and keeps playing on repeat in my head.

‘Show them love. Show them mercy. Show them we are not dangerous with our magick flowing freely through you.’

Sucking in a sharp breath, I stare at her like I’ve been caught in the midst of a crime. Shock and shame shoot through my body, paralyzing everything but my mouth. “You know about me?” I whisper.

“My sweet child, I’ve known about you since the day you were born.”

“But how? I didn’t even know until recently.”

“Sit down. Have a cup of tea. We have much to discuss.”

The herbal mixture of the hot tea soothes me beyond anything I’ve ever had. Calm and level headed, I feel ready to embark on what feels like conversations that are years in the making.

“What do you want to know first, sweet Rose? Ask me anything and I will answer you.”

I don’t hesitate, knowing fully where I need to start. The beginning.

“Who were your parents?”

“Ah, the beginning then. My mother was Lily Riverbourne. The man who claimed me as his own but was not my blood father was Laken Riverbourne.”

She’s withholding. I can feel it, and she knows it. Remaining silent, I lift an eyebrow and wait for the rest of it.

“You know, granddaughter, this is very hard to talk about after so many years. It’s a secret that I’ve held close to my chest in the hopes that I could keep you all safe.”

“But you’ve only succeeded in keeping us ignorant so might as well spill it.” I don’t mean to be curt but my patience has worn out.

She lets out a deep sigh. "My parents were the last Elders in the Riverbourne line. The Wolves burned them to death alongside my siblings while I watched from my safe vantage point."

I suck in a deep breath, feeling remorseful at making her relive those memories. I didn't know she saw her family burning. How could a person ever forgive after that?

"I'm sorry for making you speak of it, but I need to know. Tell me about your siblings."

A soft smile crosses her face, her eyes gazing off into the distance. "There was little River. Red hair and mischief. Bear reminds me a lot of him, always into everything and never where he's supposed to be."

Chuckling, I agree. "Bear is a handful. That's for sure. Tell me about the rest."

"Then there was Hazel. She was a little younger than me but a lot like Fern. Very serious, straightforward. She had big dreams of being a mother and living a quiet life. Red hair but no magick had shown itself in her and she was approaching sixteen."

"Fern is very serious, isn't she?" I chuckle, remembering the last time I saw her and how she was so worked up about keeping a good house for her new husband.

"And then there was Delta." She pauses, eyes off in the distance and lost in the past. "He was just a year younger than me and madly in love."

"What happened to him?"

"Do you remember the story of the Elder son who married the Alpha daughter? The story that started the Burning Times?"

"Yes," I whisper, not wanting to hear her next words but needing to at the same time.

"Delta was the Red who fell in love with the Wolf. Ultimately, the pregnancy killed her. Our lack of knowledge killed her, but the Alphas blamed it on us and took their grief out in vengeance. Like I told you in

the letter you forced me to write, anger has no place here. Only pity and forgiveness. And that's what I'm asking of you. Don't be angry with them. They went through something you will hopefully never feel. Instead, offer them understanding and patience. Offer them kindness. This whole situation with the midwifing may prove to be more beneficial than you know."

"Do you also have the power of foresight? Because I feel like it's a Godsdamned mistake."

"No. That's not one of my gifts, but I've learned over the centuries to have faith in people. And that's what I'm asking of you. Have faith, Rose. Give them a chance to prove you wrong and change our future."

Silent for a long time, I sip my tea and think about what she's said. "So, you think I'm safe among Wolves with my magick?"

"No. I think it's a huge risk, but you're the only one who can go and protect your mother if things take a turn for the worse."

"You're a midwife and a healer, from what I hear. You could go."

"They would smell my Wolf from the moment I stepped in the forest. No. I can't go until I'm able to control it and face the consequences. The birthing season is not the time to test the Alphas' understanding."

She's right. She's always right, and for that reason I'll accompany my mother in a few months time. Until then, I'll do everything I can to learn about our people and my magick.

My heart seizes in my chest and stops beating for a moment.

Gods, what'll I do when I see Samira?

CHAPTER 19

SAMIRA

G rumbling and whispers among the pack of their disapproval with the Alpha have spread. They're losing faith in her, and no matter how much she says to let it go I can't. Standing outside the pub I hear a loud rumble of voices inside, but the moment I open the door they all turn to me and it stops.

"No, no. Don't stop your conversation on account of me."

Pulling up a seat at the bar I signal for a drink. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to be around other people outside of training with the Guard. I try to avoid contact as much as possible, choosing instead to spend my time wandering in the forest or alone in my home.

Too many eyes are watching me and I notice they've moved away, leaving me sitting alone at the bar. People whisper in small groups, as if Wolf ears can't hear them anyways. I'm too irritable to be around anyone, so I abandon the pub and flee to my favorite hiding spot in the mountains. From my vantage point, I can just barely make out smoke coming from a few chimneys in the Crimson Valley.

I wonder if one of the trails of smoke is coming from her hut.

Thoughts of my red-haired beauty have turned from angst and lust to anger lately. How quickly I fell for her makes no sense. At times, when I sit back

and look from the outside it seems like I was bewitched or something. Shaking that thought out of my head, a laugh escapes me.

That's ridiculous! There's no such thing as bewitching. Or is there?

The more I think about it, the more frustrated I get. It really doesn't make sense. For my entire life I've never had romantic feelings towards anyone. I've never loved anyone outside of my blood family, but along comes this Red and it's like all of that is shattered.

She's infected my life. I can't eat without thinking of her. I can't sleep without dreaming of her. No matter how much I work to try and distract and exhaust myself my thoughts always come back to her. It has to be some sort of curse to feel this amount of pain from not being able to be with her.

I fell for it, for her, for the mirage. And I feel like a fucking fool.

Anger rages through me at the thought of being so naive as to think what I was feeling was true love. The Red has done something to me, and I'm going to make her pay for it. Pacing back and forth on my ledge, I work myself up into a frenzy of fury. I've isolated myself from my blood family, hidden from them and everyone else, kept my mouth shut, and worked myself half to death.

"She will answer for this!"

Ripping my clothes off, I dive from the ledge, shifting quickly to my Wolf form in midair. When I touch the ground, I stand on four paws, fire burning behind my angry eyes.

Alaric's voice sounds much too close to my right. "Shit! You scared me! Did you jump from up there?"

Slowly, I turn to look at him, silent and statuesque.

"Uhhhh, ooo-kaaayyyy. Talk later?" Turning away, he quickly walks off without looking back.

I don't know what he saw when he looked into my eyes, but whatever it is pales in comparison to what I'm feeling inside. The darkness I've

suppressed presses in on the edge of my control and fights to take over my senses.

What's the worst thing that could happen if I let it?

No sooner are the words thought than I'm overtaken by what I can only describe as violence. I want—no, I need to rip out someone's heart. I need to see and taste blood and flesh. I need to seek revenge for the pain I'm feeling inside, and I know just who will face my wrath.

Rose. I'm coming for you.

Buildings and members of my pack blur passed me as I run through the village and make a beeline for the Crimson Valley. I don't care about any repercussions for the actions my mind and body want to dole out. All I care about is finding her.

Muscles and sinews move faster than I've ever been able to in all my years. Hell, I feel faster than even the Alpha. A thought briefly crosses my mind.

You could take her and claim the role.

"NO!!!!" I scream back through my mind at that intrusive voice. "I would never!"

But it would be soooo easy, the dark voice purrs, intoxicating and persuasive.

"Stop this right now!" No matter how alluring that voice is trying to be, killing for sport or status is something the fabric of my entire being would never be interested in. My darkness, it seems, is trying to corrupt me, but what it doesn't know is I'm stronger.

A scent hits my nostrils and makes me come to a sliding stop. Floral and earthy, it briefly halts my bloodlust and sends memories of our time together after she healed me shooting through my head. The way I took her for my own and the way she held me and made me feel so loved and wanted...

My heart screams inside of my chest with the worst pain I've ever felt.

The forest is dark, dank. Small animals skitter here and there, but off in the distance I hear the waves beating against the cliffside where her grandma's isolation hut is. Soft footsteps pad through the dirt floor and a gentle hum comes from her throat.

Focusing in, I can smell the blood pulsing through her veins, through her jugular, and it makes my mouth water. Revenge is so easy with someone like her. All it would take is one bite and she'd be gone for good. The curse she's placed on me will be gone, and I can go back to my life before I met her.

Crouching low, I hide at a vantage point above the path she's walking on. She'll never see me coming. As soon as she's within reach, I'll jump down on top of her and crush the life out of her with one bite.

Steps come closer. Humming grows louder. Her smell is stronger, intoxicating, deadly.

I'm going to enjoy killing her, but before I do I want her to know that I know about the curse. I want her to know I figured out what she's done. But most of all, I want to know why.

Step. Step. Step. Four more steps and I'll have her.

Humming turns to full on singing. I'm set and ready to jump when the lyrics to her song catch my attention.

"She's all I ever wanted. She's all I'll ever need. My love, my darkness, you have my golden heart until I no longer breathe."

Releasing my tension, I spring down and land behind her, teeth bared and growling.

A gasp escapes her, and then she turns and I see the tears in her deep, green eyes. So many tears followed quickly by realization. A smile spreads across her face and she rushes towards me.

"Samira!" Arms wide, she falls to her knees before me and leans in for an embrace.

But I back up a step, continuing to bare my teeth, rage and hurt foaming from my mouth.

“Samira? Are you okay?”

Lunging forward, I bark and snap at her, making her fall backward. Eyes wide, she stares shocked with every ounce of hurt I’ve felt reflecting back at me.

“Samira?” she whispers. “What happened?”

Stalking forward, head low and eyes locked on hers, I snarl and take my steps in slow strides before finally standing over her body. Laying flat on the ground, she looks up at me fearful and pained beyond words.

“Samira? Talk to me.”

I run my nose up her chest, up her neck, in her hair, sucking in her scent, searching for anything amiss. There has to be something I’ve overlooked. She has to be one of the bad ones history has spoken of. Her body quakes beneath me, but I’m too angry to care much. I want to taste her blood and watch it drain from her body as I absorb her life. I want to watch the family of the traitor mourn her loss, and then I want to kill them too.

So do it. The dark voice whispers like an addiction calling me to act. *It would be so easy.*

It would be so easy, but something tells me to stop. Something creeps into my dark heart and makes me stop what I’m doing. Golden energy flickers amongst the darkness right in the middle of the chambers of my heart like a tiny spark in the darkness.

Looking down at her, my Wolf vision changes and the darkness recedes a bit. And then I see it. The gold energy surrounding her and flowing through her. Pure golden light calls to the tiny spark inside of myself and pulls it out, makes it spread, sings for it to fill me up and chase away the darkness that wants me to kill her.

It’s too much. Too much sensation. Too much confusion. Too much everything. Turning, I walk behind the closest tree and force my body to change back to my human form. When I step out from the other side, Rose

is standing up and brushing the dirt from her cloak and checking that her wig is still secured in place.

“Rose,” my voice comes out in a gruff whisper, heavy with emotion.

Hurt eyes snap up to meet mine, leaden with accusations and betrayal. “I thought we were passed this, Samira. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Me? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m living my life and giving you space. We agreed it was the safe thing to do, so what the feck are you talking about?”

Stepping towards her, completely bare, I don’t even feel the chill in the air from the quickly approaching frozen season. Green eyes peruse my nakedness, her face changing to one of lust and then quickly snapping back to anger.

Closing the distance between us, I wrap my fingers around her small throat and lift her off the ground with no effort. Carrying her the few feet to the closest tree, I push her up against it and hold her there with my knee between her thighs. I can smell her arousal building and seeping from her traitorous cunt and lick my lips, wanting to taste something more than her blood in this moment.

“You, little Red, have betrayed me. I trusted you with my life, with my heart, but it was all a game to you, wasn’t it?”

“I, uh, don’t know what you’re talking about,” she chokes out around my tight grasp.

Fingers tightening, I cut off her air completely. “Are you sure about that? I know about the curse, Rose. I know what you did to me.”

She shakes her head violently, as much as my hold will allow her. Tears leak from her eyes, her face growing red, lips paling as her oxygen is depleted. Letting up on my hold, I allow her a small amount of air, and she sucks it up greedily.

“I—didn’t—”

“Oh, but you did. You see, I’ve been a fucking wreck since I left you. Not sleeping, not eating, avoiding my pack. I’ve been working myself to death trying to get you out of my head. So quickly you worked your way inside of me. And then I asked myself the question I was avoiding. How? How did you attach yourself to me and make me forget what you truly are?”

“I—love—”

Anger shoots through me and my hand tightens, cutting her air off again. “Don’t finish that fucking sentence or I’ll snap your neck right now! You don’t love me, Rose. You cursed me with your Red magick. You know it and now I know it. This is all some elaborate trick. But, you know the only thing I can’t understand is why?”

Her head shakes in denial, tears now pouring down her face.

“I came here to kill you, Rose. I came to rip your throat out and feast on your flesh. And then, I planned on doing the same thing to your family. I came to wipe out the Riverbournes.”

Small hands claw at my arm, trying to break my grip but I’m much too strong for someone as small as her. The darkness has only elevated that.

But then, she does something I don’t expect. She stops fighting. She stops fighting and stills, looking deep into my eyes. Green hitting gold in a violent collision.

And I hear her voice inside of my head.

“Let me go, Samira. I love you. This isn’t a trick. Even if I could do that, I would never. You know that. Samira, my love, my only love, holder of my magick, I love you and will love you until I am no longer in this body and then I’ll move onto my next life and love you harder.”

In shock, I release the front of her neck, instead wrapping my hand around back and underneath her hair. Pulling her body forward, I crush her lips to mine in what is the only kiss I want to feel for the rest of my life.

Soft gasps escape her as she opens her mouth and I dive my tongue inside. Velvety and sweet, I suck her tongue and plunder her mouth, starved and melting into her. Her apex grinds against my thigh as I press her hard into

the tree, grasping at her breasts, breaking our kiss only to run my tongue down her neck.

When we're together like this, there is only her. My surroundings are forgotten, senses dull, and she's all encompassing. There's nowhere else I'd rather be for every single day of the rest of my life, and that scares the shit out of me.

"Rose, we have to stop," I murmur against the rise of her breasts.

"Okay," she pants back, fingers wrapped tightly in my hair, pulling my face firmly to her body.

My fingers delve into the top of her dress and rip the fabric open in one swift motion, exposing her breasts to the cold air. Dark pink nipples pebble making me salivate for just a taste.

"Samira, I...we...someone might walk by and see us." But the husky tone her voice has taken on does nothing but drive my carnal need further.

Covering her mouth with my free hand, I bend and wrap my lips around the perfect, taugt bud. Wolf teeth exposed, I sink them into her flesh just enough to illicit the muffled cry I've been dreaming about. Alternating between laving and biting, I grind my knee harder into her apex, moisture leaking through her clothes onto my exposed thigh, soaking me with her slickness.

Sweet and musky scent invades my rational brain and I grind into her harder, suck on her nipples harder. Her body involuntarily rocks back and forth on me, that sweet little cunt weeping for release. I need her to cum. I need to hear her muffled cries and own her pleasure. I need to remind her that she's mine, and I'm hers.

And even more, I need to apologize for ever having doubted that what she feels for me, how she loves me and I love her back, is the real thing.

"Sweet little Red, I feel you trembling. Are you scared of the big bad Wolf?"

"No," she murmurs through my hand.

“I could bite you, Rose. I could rip that beautiful flesh and make you bleed.” I taunt her, murmuring between sucks and bites on her beautiful tits.

Her small hand reaches up and entangles in the back of my hair. With more aggression than I remember her having, she pulls my head back so my neck is craning as I look into her eyes.

“Then do it, Samira. I’ll only ever bleed for you. My blood is yours. I want you to take it, for without you my life means nothing.”

Slamming my face back down to her chest, she holds me there, silently pleading for my bite. No longer in control of my willpower, I give her exactly what she wants and sink my teeth into the perfect curve at the bottom of her breast.

Golden energy rushes into me in the form of crimson and flowers. Her blood coats my tongue and feeds my lust, turning my animal instincts loose from any semblance of control I thought I had. Nails growing, teeth elongating, muscles swelling, my body turns into the beast-laden human form that I’ve tried to suppress or hide from her.

No longer do I fear scaring her or hurting her. And she holds no more reserves, either. Small fingers wrap around my wrists and pull my hands to her hips, her beautiful hips that are grinding and gyrating on my thigh. Sinking my nails in, I hear the fabric rip but keep digging into her flesh until I’ve hit bone. And then I use my strength to pull her dripping pussy further into the rigid, bulging muscles of my thigh, urging her to release.

Her cries echo through the forest, but I quickly release her breast from my teeth and suffocate her pleas with my mouth. The taste of her saliva mixing with the taste of her blood and my own mouth is like no aphrodisiac I’ve ever had. I forget who I am, where I am, only needing to make this sweet Red in my arms cum and cry my name.

As if she heard my thoughts, she breaks our kiss and pulls back on my hair, baring my neck to her. Small teeth sink into my throat, piercing my flesh just a bit. I can smell my blood in the air as she sucks it into her body and cries my name through muffled lips, her body violently jerking and thighs tightening as she reaches the apex of her pleasure.

Her orgasm is long and drawn out as she sucks and rides me, the sensation of her mouth on my neck and moisture running down my thigh bringing me close to my own release.

I don't know how much time passes before I lower her to the ground, but when I do she's limp and spent. The bodice of her dress is frayed. Her body reeks of sex and blood, but the biggest smile is on her blood caked mouth as she gazes up at me with those green eyes that make my knees go weak.

"I love you, Samira," she whispers.

"I love you, Rose."

"I have to go. I don't want to, but I have to."

"I know. I'll follow you at a distance until you're safely home. You should wash in the river once you're inside of your territory."

"I will," she whispers, a mischievous smirk on her face.

"Don't look at me like that or I'll bend you over and pink up that ass."

"Promise?"

"Guaranteed. Now, go. Before someone comes looking for either of us."

"When will I see you again?" Her eyes are round, frightened, but I can't lie to her.

"I don't know. You know the risks. Maybe not until birthing season."

"It's so far away." Rose's voice cracks, barely holding back the tears that I feel on the verge of myself.

"It is. I'll sneak away and see you when they're all distracted with the new babies."

"You won't have to. I'll be there with my mother."

Shock and anger shoot through me, and without warning I lash out at her.

"You'll what?! You can't come into the pack. This isn't like last time,

Rose. They'll all see you, and you'll be mingling amongst them. One slip up and that's it. You and your people will be killed."

Squaring her shoulders, she stands up straight and looks at me with what I can only describe as her take-no-shit approach. "Regardless, it's either me or Fern, who will be heavy with child by then. There's no one else. I'm coming, but they'll think I'm my sister. It's going to be fine. My mind is made up, so don't bother arguing with me about it."

My thoughts race at what I can do to keep her safe, ways I could coerce the Alphas to not let her come, but I hit roadblocks at every turn.

"I can hear you thinking, ya know. Not the exact words but the emotions and intent are loud and clear. Stop plotting. I'll be fine. You need to trust me, Samira."

"It's them I don't trust," I grumble. "Promise me if something happens you'll come to me or have my Aunt Daciana or my sister Auri find me."

"You have a sister?"

"It's a long story and one we don't have time for. Promise me, Rose!" I sound desperate, I know it, but I don't care. I'm terrified of losing her.

"I promise. Goodbye, Samira." Sweet lips reach up and kiss me so softly, so gently, that I commit the moment to memory. It could very well be the last time we kiss, and I don't want to forget a second of it. Of her.

"I love you with my entire heart, Rose."

"And I love you with all my heart, Samira. Be smart. Be safe."

"You, too."

With no more words, I shift back to my Wolf form and slink through the trees, watching her until she's safely back inside the Crimson Valley.

Love. The elation and dread I feel simultaneously are overwhelming.

"I need a strong drink," I grumble to myself. Making my way back home, I think of Rose and the gigantic bottle of spirits waiting for me next to my fireplace.

CHAPTER 20

ROSE

Cold water rushes over me and soothes the aches in my body, but I don't want them completely gone. The pain is a reminder that Samira is real. That our love is real. That all is not lost and I'll see her again.

Stepping onto the riverbank, I search for my tattered dress and red cape and come up empty handed. I know I left them on a nearby fallen tree. Maybe they fell underneath. Searching around the tree, I'm still unable to find my clothing and throw my head back, yelling out in exasperation.

"Are you fecking kidding me, Gods? Seriously?"

A chuckle interrupts my thoughts. "Looking for this, my dear?"

Grandma steps out from behind a tree, my destroyed dress and cape in her hands. Holding my clothes at a distance between two fingers, she sniffs at the air and disgust crosses her face.

"Now, Rose, not to be a hypocrite but rolling in the hay with a Wolf might be a bit too dangerous, even for you." Amusement twinkles in her eyes and a large grin spreads across her face at my obvious mortification.

Butt ass naked in front of the Gods and nature and now my grandma, I feel mortification burning flames up my body.

“Well, you’ve done it, grandma. I think I’ll go and die now. You can find me washed up downriver.” I turn dramatically and step back towards the water.

“Oh, pish posh. Stop being dramatic, dear. Put your clothes on and come with me. We can’t have you going home looking like that.”

I look at her like she has three heads, not understanding what she means other than my ruined dress.

Gesturing at my body, she rolls her eyes. “Looking like you’ve been freshly fucked and covered in bruises and blood.”

“What?!” Shifting my attention to my body, I take note of a few purple bruises that are starting to appear on my hips and crescent shaped wounds with blood dripping from them. Involuntary shivers rack my body at the memory of her nails sinking into me there and hitting my bones in resistance.

“Clothes. Now. Hurry up. I’m famished. I could devour an entire pig right now.” She says it so casually, as if I don’t know she’s a Wolf and that’s a very real possibility.

With no further delay, I snatch my clothes from her and throw them on. Clutching my red cape tightly around me, I follow her back to her hut, my head hung low like I’m a child caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

It’s just past nightfall by the time we cross the threshold, and she bolts the door behind us. Anticipation of the incoming lecture has me on edge, but instead she motions for me to sit at the dining table and gets to work mixing herbs and brewing a tea.

While the water is working towards a boil, she walks over to a wall of vials and jars, tapping her abnormally long and sharp nail on her teeth as she searches through them.

“Ah, here it is. Drink this first and chew these leaves but don’t swallow them. Hold this, too.” She hands me vials of liquids and a plate of herbs, followed by a red crystal. “Tell me, did he finish inside of you? I have some herbs to prevent pregnancy, too. Let me find them.”

“Uh, grandma, that won’t be necessary. He is, uh, a she.”

“A she?” Her eyes light up, the smile growing wider with a row of huge, jagged teeth gleaming. “That’s something I didn’t see. My magick must be slipping in my old age.” She turns back to the stovetop to check on the tea, and I hear her murmur to herself. “Or it’s the damned Wolf blood. I need to—”

“Visit the archive?” I chime in a singsong voice to tease her.

“Was I talking out loud again?”

“Yep. So, you said you didn’t see the Wolf being a her, so that means you did see there being a Wolf. What else do you see? And what happened to not having the power of foresight?”

“My magick is growing daily. I can see things or predict them, I’m not sure which, but it only applies to people who are my blood. I see your mother throwing a fit when you come home unsullied and battered. She’ll burn the entire continent of Cordova down assuming you’ve been violated. Well, violated against your will. Seems all of this,” she gestures toward my body, “was freely given. Must be some Wolf.”

“She is.” Involuntarily, I smile broadly and get lost in my thoughts. Her hands. Her teeth. Her smell.

Grandma clears her throat uncomfortably and interrupts my daydream. “Good because your immediate future is going to be a very hard one. I can’t see everything, but there will be tests and violence, loss and love, death and life. True love isn’t worth having if it comes easy. Remember that as you go through this journey to be with your one true mate.”

I swallow deeply at her revelation. It’s not something I didn’t already feel, but hearing it from her makes it all too real.

“Grandma, what can I do? We’re forbidden to be together, and they think our people are a threat. You know the history. You were there.”

“Yes, I was, but that doesn’t mean I have all of the answers. Reika and Rikon were vengeful, hurt parents back then, but time has a strange way of healing and making you see things from a different angle. Perhaps they’ve

grown and can be introspective when it comes to the past. Perhaps this outreach you and your mother are doing for their babies will be the catalyst. I can't see it."

"So, is there an answer for us or are we to suffer endlessly for our love?"

"There is always an answer. You just have to find it."

"I feel like you already know where I should start."

She sets a cup of tea down in front of me gently and pats me on the cheek. "Drink up, my dear. I'll be right back."

With the swift, quiet motions of her Wolf, she disappears into the next room and comes back a few moments later with something wrapped in linen and tied with leather cords. Setting it down in front of me on the table, with a soft squeeze on my shoulder she takes the seat across from me and sips on her own tea.

"What's this?"

"What you were searching for. The rest of May's journals."

"Have you read them?"

"Partially. It became hard to read the thoughts of a Red as she slipped into madness, so I had to put it down. I never found the courage to pick them back up."

I give her an understanding look, unable to imagine what she went through. "And of what you've read, what do you think?"

"I think there are things you have to see with your own eyes. Keep them safe, Rose. Those journals may contain the most important history our people have."

A tear escapes my eye, and I clutch them to my chest. "I will," I whisper through even more escaped tears.

"Good. Now drink that tea. We must heal your injuries before sending you home to the overattentive eye of your mother." Smiling brightly, she gives me a wink. "No idea where she got that from."

“Yeah. No idea,” I smile back.



My magick came in when I least
expected it and now there's a dead
Wolf hidden in the forest. It wasn't my
fault. I was walking home from the
flower meadow after having retrieved
some things for my mother and there he
was.

Standing in the path, he tried to talk to
me of mundane things. He asked me if
I'd like an escort home, if I'd like to try
some of his mother's pastries one day. I
declined his advances, seeing them for
what they were, but he persisted.

Walking side by side, we came to a part of the path where the dense trees overhead blocked out the sun and shrouded us in shadows. That's when he attacked me. I didn't know what to do at first, so I lay still on my back as he touched me wherever he pleased, my protests and pleas going unheard.

His hand reached up under my dress and that's when it happened. Magick flashed through me and then down to the tips of my toes and fingers. The power was intoxicating, calling to me to use it, to stop him and save myself.

So I unleashed it.

Pressing my thumbs into his eyesockets, heat flared down my hands and through my fingertips. The liquid in his eyes bubbled as he screamed and flailed, and then they popped and he went limp on top of me.

I drug his body into the forest and hid him beneath a log, but now I don't know what to do. If I tell anyone, I risk them being held as an accomplice and executed alongside me. If I don't tell anyone, I'll have to deal with a body on my own.

Cracking my brain I thought hard about what mother would say if I could go to her for help. She would say, "May Mountainbourn, the ocean is deadly and vicious. You'd do well to keep anyone who you don't want to die a very painful death away from the cliffside. They could very likely slip and be swept away."

Mother has always been the brightest of us all.

-May

CHAPTER 21

SAMIRA

I never thought I would be someone who would pine over missing their other half, but here I am counting down the days until the birthing season is upon us and dreading the days passing at the same time. Yes, I'll be able to see Rose again, but she'll be in great danger. I've made contingency plans for all of the things that could go wrong, and yet everything I think of seems inadequate.

If the worst outcome happens and we lose a mother or child, the pack will call for the Red midwives' heads and the Alphas may not be able to stop them in time, if they even care to do so. The human village could provide a hiding spot until I'm able to figure out a way to get them off this damned island. Surrounded by high cliffs, we get no visitors and no one ever leaves. There are no boats that can traverse the deadly waters, even if we had the means of making something bigger than a small rowboat.

Simply put, Wolves are not meant to be on water, and those who are don't care to come somewhere that has undergone such severe civil unrest during our history. The only reason the humans don't leave is because they can't, so my only solution is to hide the midwives until I can talk some sense into the Alphas and the rest of the pack.

Rose will be posing as her sister, Fern, and since they're twins, though not identical, it could still be possible to mistake one for the other. With no

more inspections, no one will know Fern is heavy with child and anyone that questions Rose's identity can easily be dismissed with the twin thing.

My main concern is her red hair and magick. Like her people, her core is healing magick. She's gifted beyond what I thought could still be possible since the Burning Times. The Wolves have been told the magick was wiped out in the Reds and only lived in those with red hair. Since we've always executed them upon discovery since then, I too thought all of the magick was gone. But obviously not.

What if Rose uses her healing magick to save one of us and someone notices and speaks out? What if her hair slips from beneath her wig? How can I protect her if I'm not with her every, single moment she's in our village?

Those are the questions that plague me. Short of being a stalker and shadowing her everywhere she goes, I don't know what I can do. Though, I do have to admit stalking her has its benefits. My fangs grow slightly at the memory of our last interaction in the woods. Memories of her flesh, her scent, the way my hand felt around her neck, assault me and cause me wander off in my head for an undetermined amount of time.

As I walk through my village a month before the births are expected to begin, a bead of sweat trickles down my spine in the warming weather. The air is pungent with the smell of animals and defrosting ground. The Guard jogs by on a morning run, something I'll be joining them on again soon. Reika's words keep playing over and over in my dreams alongside a feeling of needing to work on my physical weaknesses to prepare for something. Something big that is always just out of reach and then I wake up.

I don't know if my new powers or magick or whatever this is that's inside of me is trying to tell me something, but I'm going to listen and hope it's wrong.

Small feet come running up behind me and pad to a brisk walk in my shadow. "Hey! Where you been?" Auri looks brighter, happier than the last time I saw her a few days ago. Since she came to live with us, she looks like a totally different person entirely. No longer thin and frail, she's put

on some much needed weight and looks healthy and vibrant. Though her habit of being an annoying pest still makes itself known, she's part of our family now. It feels like she's always belonged, a missing link to our family puzzle that fits just right.

"I've been working and sleeping. Where have you been?" My eyes rove over her and quickly come to a conclusion. "You're looking flushed and mussed for so early in the morning. Who is it?"

"Who's what?"

"Come on. Seriously? Did you forget we're all Wolves? I can smell the sex all over you. Who is it?"

"Oh! Ummmm..."

"Lemme guess." Leaning in, I give her a sniff and immediately recognize the scent. "Alaric?"

"Shhhhhhh!" she hisses. "Is it that noticeable?"

"Let's just say, yes. Absolutely. Go find a bath. Hell, use mine."

"Fine. Meet up later? I wanna tell you all about him."

"Auri, those aren't details I need haunting my nightmares. I have enough already. Thank you."

"No details. I just miss you, big sis. I wanna hang out."

She knows just how to get under my skin and worm her way into my heart. I never dreamed I could be a big sister, and now this annoying, little yellow Wolf has a place in my heart that has room for very few others.

Letting out a huge sigh and rolling my eyes, I smirk down at her. "Alright. You win. I'm headed to see if the Alphas have time to speak to me, then I'm off to train with the Guard. You should come. Might do you some good to build those muscles since you're fucking one of them."

A loud laugh bursts from her mouth, quickly followed by her hand trying to muffle the sound from onlookers. "You're probably right about that. I

might join you. I might not. We'll see. Laterssss!" she sings and turns to hopefully take a bath in my cabin.

"Alaric," I mumble to myself. At least he'll be off my ass now since he's most definitely riding hers. They're both very innocent at heart, young, carefree, but have seen violence and pain. They could be very good for each other, so maybe they'll work out in the long run. A smile spreads across my face at the image of the two of them as a mated pair.

The meeting hall comes into view ahead of me. Normally, a member from the Guard is stationed outside since the attempted coup, but today there's no one. That seems very strange. What if there's been another coup and it was successful? What if something's happened to the Alphas?

Picking up my pace, I make it to the doors in less than a minute and fling it open, fully expecting to see chaos or carnage inside. Instead, I'm met with a mostly empty room except for a red cape standing in front of the dais. Reika and Rikon are stoic in their seats, looking down upon the visitor. And I can smell her scent wafting up to me as I stand frozen just inside the door and it slams behind me.

It's her. She's here. Fuck! What do I do? Why is she here?

The loud slam of the door causes the Alphas to look up and our visitor to turn towards me. Holding my breath, my heart squeezing in my chest, I'm able to relax when I see the face is not the Red I was expecting. This one is a little older, brown hair, round faced, but her smile is the same as my Red. It spreads the span of her face and her large green eyes are round with joy at seeing me.

"Oh, Alphas! Is this her? She looks so different from the last time I saw her in her sick bed."

"It is," Reika's deep voice carries up to me, a smile spread across her face as well. "Perhaps a proper introduction is in order. Samira?" She motions for me to descend the stairs and stand next to the woman. "This is my granddaughter, Samira. Samira, this is Laurel Riverbourne. She is a seasoned and generational healer and midwife, one of the two who will be helping us with our birthing season. She was there when you were frozen in sleep during your illness."

“So nice to meet you.” I reach my hand out to shake hers and am instead pounced upon by the small woman who wraps her arms tightly around me.

“I’m so happy you made it,” she whispers into my chest. Frozen with the shock of the physical contact, I look up to the Alphas for direction and it’s Rikon who gives me the nod of approval that I need. So, I embrace the small woman and pat her back in an attempt to comfort her.

“Thank you for what you did for me, and thank you for being here for our mothers and babies.”

Holding me back at arms length, she looks me over with an assessing eye. “Of course. I’ll always be here when Reika and Rikon call on me. We may be very different people, but we’re all still people. We need each other. I’m sure there will be one day the Reds will need the Wolves to return the favor.”

“Yes, and we’ll be there,” Reika states confidently. She looks down upon this Red woman differently than I thought she would. Reika and Rikon enacted the laws that burned and continue to bind the Reds, and yet there’s a softness with this one. She’s different, and I’m going to find out why.

Stepping back out of Laurel’s grasp, I turn and address the Alphas. “You three seem to know each other.”

“We do. Laurel’s mother was a very important member of their village before she became ill. She was an excellent midwife and healer. Iris knew herbs and tinctures like no one I’ve ever seen in all of my time alive. It was amazing the things she could do. Truly a sight to behold. Alas, she became ill and isolated herself on the little island some time ago, as you know.”

“Ah, yes. The supply deliveries. I’m aware.”

“My daughter, Rose, was handling those for us since my husband’s unfortunate farming accident left him unable to walk. She’s responsible but is uniquely different than most, as the Alphas know since they did me the blessing of having you follow her and keep her safe.”

My attention snaps away from Laurel and back to the two people wincing on the dais. “What? You sent me to watch her as a favor? That doesn’t

make sense. Why would you do that?”

“Because Fenris was a monster and the forest wasn’t safe for Laurel’s daughter with him around. There was no telling who else he had under his paw at the time to coerce into doing his dirty work. We thought it best to protect those who need it with the strongest of us and decided that was you.” Reika is solid in her thinking and obviously irritated at having to explain herself in front of our visitor, but I’m too annoyed to care.

“Couldn’t you have told me? I mean, I thought I was out there on a throw away mission. You should have explained to me why I was following the quiet one before I figured out the danger on my own.”

Reika sighs loudly and squeezes Rikon’s hand, signaling for him to take over before she loses her shit on me. I know I’m wearing her patience thin, but I don’t care. They sent me on a job for months upon months without fully informing me of the risks. Things could have turned out differently if I didn’t figure it out for myself. Remembering the few times I left her before she was safely back in her village, I shiver. Fenris or his cronies could have snatched her up easily, and I was long gone and would have never known until her body was found—or not found.

A vision assaults me of Rose lying lifeless and pale, drained of the golden essence that makes her so special. Nausea and bile creep up my throat, and I can physically feel the pallor on my face change and cold terror run like ice up my spine.

“Samira? Are you okay?” Laurel grabs my hand and steps into me. Strong arms wrap around my middle and support me as I start to sway. She guides me backward and sits me down in a chair in the front row. I can’t focus. I can only stay locked in my head on the vision of Rose—of my Rose, dead and gone because I was unprepared.

A light rustling sounds nearby and something is placed between my lips. “Here. Suck on this. Peppermint. It’ll help with the nausea.”

The flavor of the leaves hitting my tongue snaps me out of my trance and back to the present where I see Laurel kneeling before me, concern all over her pretty face. She looks like a warm mother. Like someone I would have loved to be my mother once upon a time.

But this is not a life where a Red can be a mother to a Wolf. No. This is a life where a Wolf can have no mother, no father, and be raised by a warrior. Not that I regret Aunt Daciana being my mother figure, but looking at Laurel makes me wonder what the other side would have felt like.

Would she have baked cookies for me and sang to me as she tucked me into bed? Would she have taught me about nature and healing? Would she have hugged me and told me how much she loved me?

Yes. Laurel is the mother figure I sorely missed out on, and it makes my heart ache to not only want what I never had but to think of my strong but broken aunt as something other than what I needed.

A smile ghosts my face followed closely by a few tears welling in my eyes. Feeling better, I find my voice and try to brush off my odd behavior to the mother of the woman I love.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I forgot to eat dinner last night and didn’t get breakfast this morning. Got a little lightheaded, I guess.”

She pats my hand in comfort, still kneeling before me and looking up into my eyes. “That’s okay, love. Chew on those leaves until you feel better and then I’m sure the Alphas can find someone to get you to the pub. Do they still have those giant venison ribs?”

I chuckle. “They do, but how do you know about those?”

“Reika and Rikon have been close with my family for a long time. My mother came here many, many moons ago and would bring them home to us as payment for her services. It’s the best I’ve ever eaten. No wonder you all are so strong,” she winks.

That’s interesting information she let slip, but was it really a slip? Something tells me Laurel Riverbourne is a force to be reckoned with. I see a lot of her in Rose, and it makes me like her even more. Briefly, I wonder if Rose’s grandma, Iris, is like her, too.

“How’s your mother doing, Laurel?”

She startles at my blunt question but quickly regains her composure. “Surprisingly well. It’s been the most amazing miracle, but she has been able to cure herself from the shedding disease. Still isolating, she’s returned to her hut in our village. It’s the strangest thing. I thought no one came back from the shedding disease, but thank the Gods she’s alive and well and back with us where she belongs.”

I sigh in relief because now Rose will have no reason to go into the forest, though I’m also curious about something else.

“That’s wonderful news. When did she come back to you?” Reika asks, very interested.

“It was the beginning of the dying season, I think. Shortly after Samira was healed and returned to you.”

With some quick mental math, I work out some timelines in my head and realize my last encounter with Rose was after her grandma returned home. So why the fuck was she alone in the forest?

“Laurel, can I ask you a question?” I ask sternly. She turns and faces me, all sense of joy fleeing her face at my tone. “If Rose’s grandma came home during the dying season, then why is Rose still in the forest alone?”

Laurel looks shocked but plays the part well. I know she’s acting, but I don’t want to sour our relationship and jeopardize her helping us during our birthing season so I don’t call her out on it. “Was she? When? Oh, Gods! That girl has an independent streak I’m unable to break.” She looks over her shoulder to the Alphas with an amused look plastered on her face. “Why, just the other day we found her in the river trying to catch fish with her bare hands. She’s a free spirit, my Rose, but I wouldn’t change a thing about her.” Turning back to me, she grabs my hands. “Thank you for telling me,” she says softly. “I’ll have a conversation with her about the dangers of being alone outside of our territory, even if she’s wearing a red cape.”

Laurel stands then and squares her shoulders as she turns back to the Alphas. “Should we continue our discussions and plans or would you like me to return another day considering how ill Samira is feeling?”

“Continue!” I blurt out, blushing slightly at my outburst. “I’m feeling much better. I’ll just sit here and observe, if that’s alright?”

Reika nods in approval and the conversation continues about Laurel and “Fern” being the midwives, supply needs, expectations, and contingency plans if there’s a babe that needs a higher level of care.

“And I’ve already overstocked herbs and tinctures. I’m currently working on something new to help with pain, but I can understand if mothers may not want it. The pain of labor seals the bond, but the pain of a very hard labor can complicate things. I’ll save it for those dire situations. Right now, we’re testing it on our sows. It’s proving very effective, especially when we have to cut out the piglets. The mothers are able to recover and the pain is lessened if not entirely gone.”

“That’s good news, Laurel. Tell me, what do you need from us?” Rikon smiles down at her warmly, seemingly grateful for her. Listening to her confidence, the same emotions start to seep into me, as well. She knows what she’s doing. Reds are indeed an ally for us in this.

“I need lots of towels and blankets, sanitizing soaps, and you may want to have a backup supply of cow’s milk from freshly birthed heifers. The milk from the first hours or up to a day or two after birth is full of things needed for a newborn. If you have a mother who can’t produce or Gods forbid passes, then that baby will need the nutrition. You may want to reach out to the human traders to get you the extra supply.”

“Understood. What else?”

The conversation continues for a long time, but I’m zoned out and staring at Laurel. There’s something extremely familiar about her that’s nagging at me. It’s not any resemblance to Rose, though that is quite obvious. But there’s something else there.

By the time the meeting is over, I’m no closer to answering my own riddle, so I say my goodbyes and look forward to and dread the day Rose steps into my village and I can lay eyes on her again.

Rose. My Rose is going to be in among my pack and within my grasp. Gods, I miss her.

CHAPTER 22

ROSE

It only happens twice a year, but when the three moons align above Cordova every Red feels it. A jolt of magick and power crackles through the land. The Wolves can be heard howling among the highest peaks of the mountains. We don't know what happens to them during the alignment, but since they are children of the moons it's safe to assume something calls to them.

The struggle to resist my magick and suppress my internal desire to shine my power like molten gold is prevalent in my mind. I don't want to be around people, but I live with my family. Grandma is probably one of the Wolves howling in the distance, so I can't go to her. I'm stuck inside surrounded by noises and people when nature calls me to come outside and be free.

Bear is in front of the fireplace tossing in dried leaves and random things from outside and watching them burn with rapt attention. That child is going to be a handful when he becomes a young man.

Father and mother are sitting next to each other, holding hands, and watching Bear in his usual state. These days it seems he's wilder than normal and needs more supervision, something my parents have very little time for. Most days, Bear leaves after breakfast and returns a filthy mess before supper. We can never get a straight answer about where the little wild one has been, but he seems happy so the issue isn't pressed further.

Absently, a smile crosses my face while I watch the three of them. I hope I can be happy with a partner one day. I don't know if children are even something I want or something that I should bring into the mix of what I am, but the happiness that I see in my own family is something I'd like for myself.

Closing my eyes, I try to picture my future and manifest it into the threads of destiny. And the only face I see is Samira. Beautiful Samira with her long dark hair swaying down her back like a curtain covering her muscles. Samira with her golden eyes and beautiful smile beckoning me closer only to find fangs ready to sink into me with delicious pain. Samira, the only being I've ever wanted for myself, ever dreamed about, ever loved...

My heart squeezes so hard in my chest I'm unable to breathe. I need to get the feck outta here. I need to be alone, if only for a little while. There are too many emotions, too much love, too much sound. Everything just feels like too much and my magick wants to shoot out of my body, and I'm barely controlling it.

"I'm going to check on grandma. I'll be back." I murmur to no one because mother and father are completely enraptured with each other and their mischievous creation, Bear.

My shift is too thin to be outside for this season, even if it's at night and no one can see me. The sheerness allows the wind and cold to creep in and send icicles shooting down my bones. Even though it's a stupid mistake, it's what I need. Shocked back into my body and the present, standing on my back porch I look down at my hands and realize they are glowing golden light.

Me...glowing!

"Holy fucking Gods!"

A few of the pigs look up at me from their pen curiously. Hell, I'm curious. Holding my hands up in front of my face, I turn them over repeatedly. My eyes trace prominent veins that look and feel like lightning being barely contained.

“What’s happening to me?” I whisper, trying to keep my panic at bay so my family doesn’t hear me inside.

The river whooshes in the distance so loudly it might as well be at my feet. A sensation nags at me, something that calls to me, draws me towards it. Promises are whispered in the sounds of the river that first birthed me into magick. They say there are answers that lie within, powers that can be revealed, magick that can be expanded.

But do I want it? Do I want any of it? It seems like the temptation to grow and be more powerful might be my undoing. So, hanging my head and pushing the magick glowing from inside me deep down into a box, I mentally lock it down. I need information and May’s journals beckons me from their hidden spot in the archives.

Grandma should be gone with the moons, but I find myself trembling with fear as I take the steps towards her hut. What if she’s there and in some bloodlust state? I’ve never seen a Wolf during their sacred time of the alignment. Do they have self control? Am I walking into my own death?

Standing at the gate on the outside of her garden, I remember my advantage. I can use my magick to find out if she’s home and feel her mental state. If she’s feeling homicidal, I’ll go home and hold onto myself until morning. If she’s amenable, I’ll go inside and talk to her like I do every other day. There has to be a balance. I refuse to believe my loving, doting, warm grandma and Samira, the one who holds my heart, turn into illogical beasts who are unable to keep from murdering everyone in sight.

No. That’s not something I could see either of them doing.

So, I tiptoe up the steps like the cautious but idiotic granddaughter I am, and I peek inside through a gap in the curtain. Nothing appears out of place and I deem it safe to go inside the silent hut. No one locks their doors, so I’m able to walk right into the back door, safely out of sight and hopefully out of mind for anyone who hasn’t seen me today.

Grandma’s hut is dimly lit with candles and the scents of Wolf’s bane and bergamot fill the air. On the preparation table lies a massive pile of lycanius mortem, the plant she sent me into the forest to find for her when she was still seeking a cure.

“I wonder what she’s doing with those,” I murmur to myself.

“Just testing some theories,” grandma’s voice sounds in my head, causing me to scream and jump. She laughs deeply in response, but I turn in circles and can’t find her. “Oh, I’m not there. Just watching my home while I’m away.”

“Where are you and how exactly are you doing that inside my head, grandma?”

“I needed to stretch my legs. Four are much more demanding than two.” She laughs to herself obnoxiously.

“Really? Are we joking about your Wolf now?”

“If not with you, than who? Kind of like you glowing like a damned beacon in the middle of the night? You, little firefly, need to learn to contain that or find a place to hide during the alignment.”

“I know. That’s why I came to you, but you’re off on a jog so I guess I’m fecked.”

She snorts but allows me a glimpse of what she sees and what she’s feeling. I’m frozen in place, standing in the middle of her hut, but not in my own mind or body. I can feel, smell, taste everything she does.

Crisp, snowy air from the mountain peaks fill my senses. Crickets chirp and small creatures skitter about through fallen leaves hundreds of yards away but my hearing is suddenly so sensitive it feels like they could be right next to me. Something coppery lingers on my tongue as my heart aligns with hers and beats a strong, rhythmic thrum in a chest that feels so much bigger than my own. The ground feels like I’m holding it in place beneath my feet. Like I’m holding the continent in place rather than existing as it always has on its own. Cold, damp dirt between my toes creates a strange sensation and makes everything right with the night, centering me.

And I fully realize that every sensation is not my own, but it feels like they should be.

And I want them to be.

“How is this possible?” I whisper aloud to an empty home.

“It’s our gift, both the Red and the Wolf. I’ve been tinkering and trying to figure out what it all means but nothing so far. Rosey, look at this.” She crests a peak with a final jump and stands still, the light in the sky above her so bright and blinding it almost hurts to see it, even through her eyes. “The moons give us power and life. They are half of the push and pull of nature. The sun cannot exist without the moons and vice versa. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“That day cannot exist without night, so Reds cannot exist without Wolves?”

“Exactly. I think the existence of our two kinds on this inescapable continent means something. But that is a discussion for another day. For now, I’m going to sit here in my little piece of heaven and talk to the moons.”

“Aren’t you worried the pack will see you?”

“If they do, they’ll think I’m one of the lone Wolves or a banished Wolf. I’m as far from the pack as I can get on the easternmost peak. Besides, my magick will feel any threat approaching, and I’ll leave.”

“Your magick? I thought you were a healer.”

“And you thought you were just a healer, too.”

My mind jolts to a stop. “Wait. What did you just say?”

“You’re not just a healer, but you felt that already, my dear.”

I’m stunned beyond brain function. I mean, yes I felt something more than healing screaming in my magick. I felt it, but I didn’t know what it meant. The gold light shooting from my body and current of lightning in my veins...I thought it was just a normal side effect of magick during the moons alignment. It’s not like I have anyone I can talk to besides grandma, and she’s been extra cryptic lately. So now, when she’s dropped this revelation on me like I’m supposed to fully know what she means or it’s implications, there’s nothing but shock and fear and, if I’m being honest, a tiny bit of anger.

Controlling my voice to something acceptable and not as emotionally twisted up as I feel, I clear my throat and speak. “Tell me what you mean by that.”

“You feel it. Power screams inside of you, begging to be let out. You are my granddaughter. Me. The most powerful Red that currently exists. Of course there’s more to you than just healing, but now isn’t the time. The alignment makes me lose myself with the pull of the moons. I need to focus here. Stay in my hut tonight. You’ll be safe so long as you keep that glow away from the windows. I’ll be home in the morning. We can talk more over breakfast.”

“I’ll be here. I promise.”

The connection between us shuts off immediately and throws me back into the reality of her home. Herbs and plants litter every surface, but the only thing I can think about is Samira. I wonder how she’s feeling, what she’s doing, who she’s with on this alignment night. Is she thinking about me? Is she missing me?

Removing my shoes, I lay down in my grandma’s bed and wrap myself in the lush blankets. Her scent of sugar and rosemary soothes me into a comfortable lull that I haven’t felt in as long as I can remember. She was always my safe place, someone I could be myself with and not worry about anything. But now, laying in her bed and feeling all warm and fuzzy in my memories, all I can think about is the other half of my heart.

Warring with myself, I debate whether or not I should send my magick down our mutual link to see if she’s okay. She might be angry when she feels me inside of her. I could interrupt some important aspect of the alignment and cause negative consequences for her.

But then again, I could take a quick peek and make sure she’s okay without her knowing...

“Just a few seconds,” I tell myself as I reach down our bond and easily connect with her. It’s like she might as well be right next to me with the intensity I feel as my golden magick wraps itself around her darkness. Braiding together, our individual pieces become a singing aura of love

shining inside of my heart and running a warmth through my body. Instantly, I feel lighter.

“Rose,” she hums inside of my head. “There you are. I miss you.” Her darkness zings through my gold, sending shivers through my body.

I curl in on myself more, wrapping my arms around my torso to keep my heart from jumping through my flesh at the reverberation her voice creates inside of my body.

“I miss you, too,” I sing to her. My internal voice feels light, airy, melodic. Electric energy and golden. Love and light. “We can’t risk this for more than a few seconds, but I had to check in on you. Are you safe? Are you well?”

“I’m lonely, but you knew that already because I feel the same thing in you. Everything else is as it always is. I can’t wait to see you during birthing season, but I’m terrified.”

“I can’t wait to see you, too. It’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

A noise sounds in the distance, not in my reality but in hers. “They’re calling for me to come run. I have to go. Take care of my heart. I love you.”

And then she’s gone, without me having the chance to respond and tell her how much I love her and how I shatter when we’re apart.

“I love you, too,” I whisper aloud to an empty room.

The emptiness I feel when our bond is shut off pulls me down into a dark place of pain. We live in a world where our love is forbidden, and I can be killed because of it. No matter that her grandparents are the Alphas, our love is illegal and I can’t see a way through the pain to the other side where we can live happily together.

It was a mistake to reach out to her. I know it now that I’m breaking apart inside, but I would do it all over again to feel the pure bliss of her darkness licking up against my golden magick. And no matter how much it hurts right now and how miserable I’ll be until I can touch her again, I’d do it

over and over for the few seconds of perfection I feel when our gifts are bonded together.

There has to be an answer to this, and I'm determined to find it.

I always thought I was supposed to be
of nature and pure. That my magick was
supposed to heal and be peaceful, but
seeing my brother suffer, seeing my
people suffer—

No! I won't be peaceful anymore. The
anger inside of me feels like it's been
fueling something else, something bigger.
I'm scared to say it aloud but-----

It feels like something darker.

My people are supposed to be light and

love, peace and nature, healing and happiness, but I feel this rage burning inside of me slowly turning my soul to ash.

I'm tired of suffering at the hands of the Wolves. I'm tired of living in fear of the next thing they decide to do to us. As far as anyone can tell me, there's never been an instance of my people doing anything to cause harm to the Wolves, yet we are always to blame.

Maybe whatever this thing is inside of me will help us be free.

—May

CHAPTER 23

SAMIRA

“We have a problem.” Daciana’s voice interrupts the peace I’ve recently found and I damn near miss the log I’m chopping.

Coming down at an odd angle due to my surprise, I stare at the sliver of wood I’ve shorn from the larger piece and click my tongue in annoyance. Turning around, I fling the axe up to rest on my shoulder and stare at her with a blank expression on my face.

“Everything is always a problem to you. You should try some meditation. See things from a different perspective.”

“Now is not the time to test me, young one,” she growls. “We have a serious problem. Have you noticed some of our pack slowly going missing since the Alphas announced the Reds would be coming to help us?”

“Of course I have. So what?”

“So, I’ve been curious about where they went. Auri and I went on a scouting mission to the human village to see if they were there.”

“Auri?” Briefly shocked, I can’t understand why she would take along my little sister but quickly dismiss it. “Okay. And?”

“And they weren’t there.”

“So they weren’t with the humans. I don’t see a problem. They’re probably living as lones or in small groups in the mountains.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but something was nagging at me so I had Auri take us to where she used to live. We found them, Sammie. We found all of them. Living together in much larger numbers than we realized in a community of Wolves and humans.”

Turning back to my job, I place a piece of wood on my block and fling my axe down on it, slicing perfectly. “Freewill exists for Wolves and humans. I don’t see a problem. Let them be.”

She clicks her tongue at me, something I remember being a frequent occurrence during my bratty teenage years. “The problem is Auri recognized some of the Wolves as those who were around during Fenris’s coup planning. Some of the humans were familiar, too. Mainly, her adoptive mother.”

“Wait. What? I thought she was dead.”

“Auri did, too, but clearly that’s not the case.”

“I have so many questions.”

“So do I.” Auri’s voice comes from behind me, making me jump. “You’re a really shitty Wolf, you know that right?”

“I’m a badass Wolf. You’re abnormally light on your feet.”

“Hmph. If you say so.” Auri’s face looks drawn, tired, like she’s been up for days.

Sitting down on a log, I pat the spot next to me. She takes a seat and bumps shoulders with me but doesn’t speak or look up from the ground.

“Talk to us. Tell us what this means, Auri.” Daciana looks genuinely concerned for our new family member, something that is a rarity in her emotional range.

Auri inhales a deep breath and on exhale a tear drips from her face landing softly in the dirt. “You know, I was happy when I thought she was dead. Happy that the air I breathed would no longer be shared with that evil, cold

woman. But even still, when I saw her today alive, well, and what appears to be prospering, it did something to me. For a moment, I was happy that my mother was still alive. I let myself hope for the briefest of moments that we could repair our relationship and I could have my mother back, but better. And then she turned and I saw her eyes. Her dark, empty eyes, and I knew that nothing changed. There won't be a happy reunion, and I think that realization is what hurts the most."

Wrapping my arm around her, I pull her small frame into my side and hold her tightly. "You don't need her. You have us. We're your blood family, and we'll always be here for you. That's all that matters now."

She nods in agreement, a few tears escaping and landing on my shirt.

Daciana clears her throat, interrupting the moment with an errant thought. "How long ago did she sell you to Fenris?"

"Five Dying seasons ago."

"And how old is she supposed to be?"

"I don't know. I was with her for sixteen years, so nearing forty, maybe. Why?"

"And she was sick and supposedly near death when she sold you, but here she is now looking like she's no more than twenty and living among an outlier group of Wolves and humans. Something is off about the entire thing."

"I agree. There are so many questions I need answered about our father. Like, why did he choose this human to leave you with? What type of relationship did they have? Was she an ally and that's why he chose her? Given the level of cruelty you said she showed you, I can't believe he knew about that side of her or he would have chosen better." Pausing, I think of the type of father who would knowingly leave their child with a monster and come to the quick conclusion Damon was a much better person than that. According to everything I've seen and the way he died of a broken heart, he seems very much like someone who loved hard and deeply.

“And—” I continue, “if your adoptive mother didn’t want you then why didn’t she turn you over to the Alphas. Surely she could have received some sort of reward or gained favor for bringing Damon’s long lost child home. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“No. It doesn’t.” Daciana passes in front of us, deep in thought as she taps her long nails on her teeth. “I didn’t recognize this young woman who you say is the same mother who raised you. It’s as if she hasn’t aged, which we both know is impossible for a human. Tell me, Auri, what is your human mother’s name?”

“Elizabeth.”

Auri’s voice is choked with the pain of voicing that name, the name of a woman who showed her nothing but hate when a mother should be nothing but love. I clutch her tighter to my side, willing the love and protection I feel towards her to wrap around her inner light. While she’s a huge pain in the ass sometimes, she’s mine and I’ve claimed and accepted her as my family. No more mistrust or suspicions lie in my heart. Now, all I see is a broken young woman who needs her family, and I aim to be the path to healing for her. Family sticks together from my generation forward. In this moment of realization, I vow not to allow my family to fracture any further or cause any more harm to each other. There’s been enough pain, and Damon will be the last of it if I have any say so in our future.

“I’ve lived a long time, young ones. Been among the humans in trade, listened to whispers and secrets, and I’ve never heard that name before. That’s not to say it’s not her real name. She may simply be a human with no friends or family who cared to speak her name. Auri, did she have anyone that came around or any other family?”

“No. Her entire family died of the shedding disease before I was born. She was alone. It’s how she chose to live in her grief. Mostly a hermit or solitary, she only interacted with other villagers for trade, choosing to keep her head covered and eyes down when we were in public. She made me do the same. I excused everything she did because of the suffering she went through in her lifetime. The innocence of a child to trust and love their mother, I guess.”

“What I’m going to say next must not go beyond the three of us? Do I have both of your word?” Black eyes pierce into both of us, and an involuntary shiver runs down my spine, dread taking its place because I know the next words Daciana is going to speak before they leave her lips. We both nod in unison, me digging my nails into Auri’s shoulder unintentionally. Her whimper makes me loosen my hold, but then Daciana says what I’ve feared will be revealed since I fell in love with Rose.

“Do you think magick still exists and Elizabeth has found a Red to cure her and reverse her aging?”

Frozen in my seat, I start to shake all over, not out of anger but out of fear. And in a quick decision, I do the only thing I know how to do to stop Daciana in her thought process and distract from the obvious. Because yes, magick is absolutely still real and yes Elizabeth has found her own Red to cure her and make her young again.

“Pffftt!” I scoff, forcing humor to the forefront of my emotions. “Magick? Really? None of us have seen a single red hair on anyone’s head in generations. The Reds are harmless just as the Alphas have decreed in our last public meeting. There’s probably a simpler explanation. Maybe it wasn’t her. Maybe she had family Auri didn’t know about. Maybe if it was her, she found some cure or way out of her disease and came out better on the other side. Hell, it could be an act of the Gods. Magick is the last thing I would ever consider since there is no proof or possibility of its existence anymore.”

Auri stiffens next to me, the gears in her mind clearly turning at a ferocious pace. “Ya know, Sammie makes some valid points. And it makes sense that she would be with the outliers and lones. She was a different kind of person, strange if I’m being blunt. The way she communicated with people, her energy, the way she spoke, it was all too strange and people gave her a wide berth. Maybe she found something in that community that she was looking for. Who knows? At this point, I don’t care. We need to focus on the bigger matter at hand.”

Daciana smirks and crosses her arms over her chest, looking down at the yellow Wolf who is centuries younger than her. “And what’s that, young one?”

“We need to ask ourselves if they are a threat.”

“Hmph,” Daciana agrees. “More scouting is necessary. Auri, you and I will do the work and report back to the Alphas only if we find something worthy of suspicion. Samira, keep this between us. There’s no reason to worry anyone until we find evidence.”

Thinking of the Reds soon to be entering our village and walking among us, it’s imperative we keep the suspicion and aggression low so I can keep Rose and her mother safe. Riling up the pack will only put them in more danger, and that’s a complication no one needs during such a vital period.

“Agreed. Let me know if you want me to come along for scouting. Otherwise, I’ll be here helping prepare for the births and working on my training.”

“And other things.” Daciana looks down into my soul with her black eyes. The sensation that passes through me feels like my shields and control are being stripped away layer by layer and she’s seeing inside of me. Like she’s seeing my secrets.

Fuck! Does she know? About me? About my power? About ...?

I stop myself from thinking her name just in time to catch a motion so minuscule I think I imagined it. Daciana’s chin tilts in a nod as if she’s answering my internal questions.

Ice fills my veins and my lungs seize in my chest. Terror and confusion overtake me.

What the fuck?!

CHAPTER 24

ROSE

For months, I've tried to reach out to Samira through our bond only to be blocked off. It's like she's built a wall between us. Every time I run my golden magick down her dark tendrils and almost reach her mind so I can speak to her it's like hitting an impenetrable force. I know she's not dead. I would absolutely feel that, at least I think I would. But I'm not sure what has caused the lonely quietude or how keeping me away isn't ripping her to shreds like it is me.

Through the silence between us I found determination in myself. My time during the frozen season was spent searching for answers, annoying my grandma, and testing out my magick. Once word of grandma's miraculous recovery made its way through the village, people started coming in droves to her and my mother for cures to their illnesses.

Standing by silently, I watched as my grandma used her healing gift and mended breaks, healed sicknesses, and aided in a childbirth. Memories were made and knowledge was gained, something I wouldn't have been able to get back if my mind was focused entirely on Samira. Looking for optimism, I guess the silence on her end was a gift of sorts, but I still ache to hear her voice in my head or touch her or even catch a glimpse of her.

"Are you alright, dear?" Grandma's voice sounds from the other side of her kitchen where she's cooking something over a giant pot in the hearth.

Snapped out of my melancholy, I look up to her piercing gaze assessing me from top to bottom. “Uh, yeah. I’m fine. Why?”

“You’re clutching your chest, dear.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t realized I was and promptly drop my hands away and return to chopping herbs on the well worn table.

“You know, the birthing time is getting closer. I saw the first hint of green poking through the melting snow today. It won’t be long now. Do you have a plan?”

“A plan for what?” My voice comes out a bit annoyed, something I didn’t mean to do but can’t take back.

She clicks her tongue at me, noting my sour mood. “Mind that temper, young one. Magick and anger do not mix well for our people.”

That’s an interesting thing to say, and it sparks a memory of something I’d read in May’s journal. “I’m sorry for being short, but it’s funny you say that. I read something in May’s journal that I didn’t understand, but I imagine you know exactly what she’s talking about. She said the rage was fueling something big and dark inside of her. That she thought it could help free her people from the Wolves and what they were doing to them. Does that sound familiar? Did you know her back then?”

A loud sigh escapes her, pausing my knife movements and drawing my attention away from my cutting. Grandma stops stirring and becomes very still.

“Grandma, are you okay?”

She doesn’t respond. Making my way quickly to her, I touch her gently on the shoulder. The contact pulls her out of wherever she went, and she spins around and faces me. Her face is ashen and drawn, something more than sadness taking hold of her.

“Come sit down.” Gently, I pull her away from the hearth and have her sit on the couch. Clutching her clammy hand, I sit quietly waiting for her to speak only to be met with almost imperceptible shivering. It’s not as if she’s cold but more like it’s inside of her blood. Like there’s a low quake

going on deep within her that an average person wouldn't be able to see or feel. But I can, and my magick can, and something is very wrong.

“Grandma, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. What can I do?” Panic starts to overtake me, and I squeeze her hand tightly, totally unsure of who I can go to for a Red-Wolf in shock or whatever the feck this is. I start to loosen my grip. “I'll go get mother. She'll know what to do. You sit right—”

But she doesn't allow me to finish my sentence. Her hand becomes suddenly too strong and tightens back on mine, pulling me flush up against her. Strong arms wrap around me in an instant, her hand moving up to clutch the back of my head and pulling me into her to rest my chin on her shoulder.

“I'd hoped you would drop your search, but it was foolish of me to think so given that I gave you the damn journals.” She pulls me back to look into my eyes, searching for something in silence for a long time. The bright green of her eyes singes into mine, like her magick is trying to draw something out of me. When she's satisfied, the pressure building inside of my head slowly subsides and her grip loosens on my arms. “You, my dear, are going to save us all. I know it with everything that makes me breathe.”

“Wh—what does that mean?” I whisper through my suddenly dry throat.

“It means I made the right choice in giving you those journals, and now I must continue to do the right thing and tell you what I can about May, one who I called friend many lives ago.”

“Friend? You were friends?!”

“Of course. How else would I have her journals?”

Something isn't adding up, and I refuse to leave without fully understanding whatever it is that she's been keeping secret. “Tell me everything.”

Nodding, she releases me and stands to return to her pot on the hearth. “Might as well talk while we work, then. This'll take all night, dear.”

“So be it. I'll put on the tea.”

Once settled back at our work stations with our steaming cups of tea, grandma spins a story of friendship and insanity that I can barely fathom is real.

“A long time ago, May and I were inseparable. She was my magickal sister, by my side learning our gifts and growing into young women together. She’s the only person besides my parents who knew the secret of my parentage. And to be honest, I trusted her fully and still don’t regret that naive action. Although, I’m sure it’ll come back to bite me in the ass one day.” She smirks at her little joke, but I raise an eyebrow and shake my head in less than amused fashion. “You have no sense of humor, dear. Won’t bed your Wolf for long without one in this day and age.”

My Wolf...

A smile ghosts across my lips before it’s quickly taken back by the loneliness I feel at our mental silence.

“Oh, don’t worry. Things will work out in the long run with her.”

Tears fill my eyes and threaten to spill over, but I quickly wipe them away before she notices. “Promise?”

“As of the current path, yes. I feel it. She’s the one for you. She’s your one true mate, Rose. It’s a rare gift to find that these days, especially amongst our opposites.”

Clearing my throat, I quickly change the subject back to May, avoiding painful thoughts of Samira as long as I can. “So, May was your friend? Were you still friends when her brother was taken?”

“Which time?”

“Oh, there were multiple? I haven’t read that far, yet. The time Wolves banned Reds from the mountains, then. Were you friends?”

“Yes, best friends. She was so distraught when they took him. Inconsolable, really. We were all powerless to the whims and tempers of the Wolves even then. Reika and Rikon returned him, but at a cost. The mountains contain great power both for Wolves and Reds. At the highest peaks we’re able to get closest to the moons during the alignment and

perform ancient prayers and rituals to the Gods. In return, they blessed us with magick, or so we thought. Either way, as you've found out, the alignment affects the Reds' magick alongside the Wolves' beast nature. Long ago, we were able to live our authentic selves side by side in tranquility. Like your own magick, Wolves and Reds had a push and pull that was symbiotic. We needed each other, dear. I still think we do, but we have to find our way back together."

"How do we do that when their hate for us runs so deep?"

"First, through necessity and then through love. It's important someone as powerful as you are doesn't fall into the anger that May did. The kind of magick and power running bone deep in you can turn dark if you let it. You must always remember your love and light. Always forgive. Always seek to be just and kind. And above all, never use your magick to lash out in anger against the Wolves."

"I would never—"

"You think that now, but desperation can make us go to places we never thought possible, dear."

"Is that what happened to May? Did something send her over the edge into darkness?"

"It did. It was the death of her brother. You see, May came from a very powerful family. One of the three family of Elders, she was the only daughter of the Mountainbournes. Her brother was her only sibling, who she looked up to as if he was a God. He could do no wrong in her eyes, but Timber was a troublemaker. Even after his captivity and return from the Wolves, he kept sneaking into the mountains to be with one of his many Wolf lovers. May was naive and thought he was running off to see his true love, as if that young man could have settled for just one woman." She chuckles, eyes far off and lost in her memories. "I remember finding him once rolling around in the barn with one of the human traders, but I didn't have the heart to break the image she'd built up of her brother so I never told her. He was quite something."

"Wait. Did you—"

“Oh, no,” she interrupts. “Absolutely not! That young man was more trouble than his pretty face was worth. Not that he didn’t try, but I never gave in to his advances.”

“So what happened to him? Did he finally settle down with one person?”

“Not at all. He broke the heart of a young Wolf woman, and her father and brothers sent him home barely alive. They beat him beyond what normal magick could cure. He survived but was never quite the same. More quiet and reserved. May often said it felt like she’d lost her brother and gained a stranger. I think that was the final catalyst. Her fear turned to anger after that, and I distanced myself once I realized my friend wouldn’t be coming back. Yes, the Wolves did terrible things, but our Elders taught us to love and forgive. They taught us about the balance the Wolves and Reds once gave to each other and the dangers of allowing darkness into our hearts, no matter how much suffering we endured.”

“So what happened? Did she go after them?”

“Not exactly. Have you already read about the Wolf she killed when she was attacked?”

“Yes.”

“The fire magick that shot through her body into his might have been self-defense, but it came from the darkest depths of her soul. Releasing that kind of energy has repercussions. For Reds, it can sometimes manifest as physical rather than spiritual. For May, it was both. When she took his life her magick streaked a black line through her hair. She hid it well by changing her part and hairstyle, but the truth always comes out in the end. Since the fracture of our relationship with the Wolves, we’ve been taught non-deadly forms of defending ourselves from childhood. May knew she should confess and atone, but instead she let the darkness take over. Feeling no remorse for her actions, darkness crept in and slowly began to consume her while she tried to hide it. But I saw it in her eyes. She wasn’t the girl I grew up with anymore. Wolves began coming into our village searching for their missing pack member, pulling us out of our beds, questioning us, torturing us sometimes. Suspicion grew among the other two Elder households and finally her mother broke under the pressure and

turned over her daughter. The decision was made among all three Elder lines to banish her from our people.”

“Her own family agreed to banish her? How could they do that to her? She must’ve been so hurt.”

“Possibly, but it was the only solution. Originally, the Mountainbournes were outvoted and the punishment was death, but May’s parents begged the other Elders to reconsider and banishment was eventually agreed upon. You see, my sweet granddaughter, if faced with no longer existing or never seeing you again, I’d choose never seeing you again. I couldn’t live this life knowing your heart had stopped beating.”

A tear escapes and slips down my cheek, fully understanding what she’s saying to be true for myself. If I’m breathing but one of my family isn’t, or if—I swallow deeply—if Samira isn’t, then I’d cease to exist. The pain of losing one of them is too much to fathom.

“So what happened to her after she was banished?”

“Even though my friend was lost to us, I carried a lot of guilt. Errands frequently led me to the human village for goods or trades. It was on one of these trips that I felt something deep inside of my spirit, something calling to me, like a dark whisper caressing my spine. Iris,” she whispers. “Iris, this way.”

Both of us shiver in unison. My herb preparation stops, and grandma lifts the huge pot from the fire like it weighs nothing and places it down on the stone of the hearth. It’s moments like these that remind me she’s a Wolf with all of the gifts that entails rather than the soft, older matriarch her outward appearance would make one believe. Turning, she sits on the couch and pats the seat next to her for me to join her. Still feeling like I’m frozen inside, I wrap myself in a quilt and sit down, completely enraptured.

“Did you follow the whisper?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And? You’re killing me here. What did you find?”

“I found May living among the humans. She was angry inside but prospering as an herbal healer. Still naive and young, I vowed to try and bring my friend back to the light, to the kindness and love we Reds are. Secretly, I visited her on my errands, never telling anyone about her. Banishment meant her name was never spoken of again, nor was anyone to have contact with her. And foresight meant my mother knew all about my continued contact with her, but I believe she didn’t say anything because she knew when the Burning Times came May would be the one to take me in.”

“May took you in? You lived with a banished, dark Red? Why am I just hearing about this?”

“Because it’s a hard thing for a young, pure mind like yours to understand, dear. I was alone in the world. Magick was being executed out of our people, and I needed to hide. It wasn’t hard to realize why my gifted mother sent me on a fruitless errand to the human village that day. She saw what was coming and knew I would be safe for a time with May.”

“And how long did you live with May?”

“Not long. Maybe a few years. It’s hard to tell time when you’re locked in grief and fear.”

I can understand that. When I waited on Samira to tell her people about my red hair and bring down death upon me, it felt like time crept by. Like death was always just around the corner. I awoke every day terrified of what was surely coming for me, and yet it never came.

Looking at my grandma’s now gray hair, I can’t understand how she hid in plain sight for so long with her red hair. “Your red hair. Did you have a wig, too?”

She sighs and turns to me with a smirk on her face. “I always wondered about my hair. You’ve always known me as the gray grandma, but once upon a time I had a flowing mass of bright red hair just like you do under that abysmal wig. After the Burning Time, I did the best I could to hide it for a while under whatever scarf or wig I could steal or make, but there came a time when I no longer needed it. It was like nature or magick or maybe even the Gods knew I needed to hide and changed it to brown. I

woke up one day and there it was. And that's how it stayed for the rest of my younger years."

"Brown? But I thought all Reds were red haired. How is that possible?"

"How is anything possible? Nature will always find a way to adapt, and I suppose magick is the same way."

"And May? Did she have the same miracle with her hair?"

"Not exactly. Remember how I told you her first kill put a streak of black through her hair?"

"Yeah."

"Well, something inside of May didn't allow her to stop hurting others. She would dismiss it as self defense or necessity, but slowly the darkness overtook the beauty that it is to be a Red. The beautiful red hair atop her head was streaked in black not long after I came to live with her. She had money from her herbal healing, whereas I was too scared to show any bit of uniqueness and chose to stop using my gifts. She wasn't a poor woman anymore. In fact, May became quite wealthy, and so she was able to afford wigs and scarfs to hide the remaining Red."

"She didn't share her money with you. What a shite friend! So you lived with her for a while and then what happened to May?"

"She slowly started slipping into insanity. The darkness was overtaking her, eating her alive. I watched as my friend withered away to nothing and then walked into the mountains, red and black streaked hair blazing in the sun, begging for the Wolves to end her. That's the last I ever saw of her. When I went searching a few weeks later I found her torn clothing and some bits of red hair and blood. It was a death sentence. Hopefully, they ended her quickly."

"That's terrible," I whisper, my chest tight with emotion.

"That's life and death. But you know, in her death I found a gift. I was able to take over her life and live among the humans as her sister for a while. My own aging was frozen, as you remember. It took a lot of effort, but I was never suspected. So many years passed. So many lives lived and lost

and died out around me while I remained completely stagnant. I never dared go near the Crimson Valley for fear of what I would find, certain I was the last living Red. It was a very hard time for me, one I'm not keen on going into great detail about, dear."

"And then you met grandpa?"

A smile lights up her face, energy glowing from deep within and radiating outward, eliminating the darkness of the last few hours of conversation.

"Yes. And then I met your grandpa. The best person I've ever known. My entire reason for moving forward and finding happiness and love in this life again."

Samira's face fills my mind and my heart soars in my chest. Golden magick pulses deep within me, and I reach down our connection and brush against the wall she's built, caressing it and covering it with my love for her.

I hope she feels it.

"I'm sure she does, dear."

What?

My eyes snap to grandma. Her eyes round with shock stare back at me.

"Uh, since when do you read minds?"

"Since now?" she chuckles but it sounds nervous rather than amused.

"Well, feck. Now my thoughts aren't even private."

CHAPTER 25

SAMIRA

She's here. Fucking hell, she's here and I can feel every fiber of her beautiful magick touching the ground in my village. Every step she takes draws me closer to her. I can't sleep, can't eat, can't think. The only thing I want is to be close to her, to inhale her scent into my soul, to hear her sweet voice.

"Hellloooo???? Samiraaaaa??? Hey! Wake the fuck up!" Auri yells at me from across the sparring circle and pulls me from my trance.

"Sorry. What?"

"I said show me that hip throw move again. Geez. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"A lot on my mind. Cut a sister a break, will you?"

"You've always got a lot on your mind. Get it together so we can go to the pub. I'm dying for a pint."

"You mean you're dying for some dick."

Auri throws her head back and lets out an obnoxious laugh. "Yeah, that too."

"Alaric still?"

“Yeah. That a problem?”

“Not at all. You two are good for each other.”

A wistful smile lights up her face. “We really are, aren’t we? Now, quit stalling and show me the damn move.”

“Fine.” Sealing up my bond with Rose, I lock it down tight and turn my attention back to Auri. The quicker I’m done with her the quicker I can find Rose and stalk her like the obsessed...girlfriend? lover? mate? ...I am.

“Alright, yellow Wolf. Give me your best punch.”

Auri squares up in front of me, smirks, then throws out her fist towards my face in a quick flash. I marvel at her speed momentarily but dodge right, grab her upper arm, position my other arm in her opposite armpit and wrap around the back of her body. With a spin of my hip, I’m flush against her body, bending, and tossing her onto the ground.

The movements feel like second nature at this point, thought no longer necessary. Weeks were spent practicing tosses and blocks while I tried to forget about Rose. My Rose. My sweet, beautiful—

The sky is blue and the ground is hard beneath my back before I realize what’s happened. Air whooshes out of my lungs with the impact. “Oof!”

“Never take your eye off the enemy, right?” Auri giggles, clearly amused with herself.

I lay still for a moment longer, staring up at a cloud that resembles the waves in Rose’s hair the last time we were together. “Right. Good leg sweep, yellow Wolf.”

“You’re distracted lately. It was easy. Wanna tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Nope.”

“Wanna talk about the two Reds currently walking around in our home?”

“Nope.”

“Wanna kill them?”

“Absolutely not. Stop trying to provoke me. I see what you’re doing.”

“Do you? Because I don’t see you doing anything besides zoning off into your head since they arrived. Might wanna snap out of it and focus on the present. There’s grumbling in the pack. Talks over ale in the pub. Those Reds aren’t safe here, regardless of the order from the Alpha.”

“I know.”

She looks at me incredulously but reaches out a hand to hoist me up. Stronger than I give her credit for, she pulls on my hand and I’m bounding up like I’m weightless.

“So what the fuck are we gonna do about it, Sammie? We can’t let anyone hurt them. The repercussions are too great for more reasons than I care to wrap my head around.”

“Look. I’ve been thinking about this since the damn pack meeting announcing they would be coming. There are so many threats, so many hidden threats, Wolves who hate them and will never trust them. I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“That’s why you have me. You forget, sister. I’m part Red. I have a greater stake in this working out and them going home peacefully than most others do.”

“Oh yeah? And what stake is that?”

“Potential for a future. One where I don’t have to hide half of myself and I’m not a damnation. One where I can live my life openly and safely and show both sides of myself. This gift I have is rare, but I’m not the only one. I can’t be.”

Thinking back to Aunt Daciana reading my mind, my goal is to reassure her with my next words without revealing someone else’s secret...or mine. “You’re not alone in being gifted, Auri.”

Her eyes grow round and small hands grab my upper arms tightly. “I’m not? Who?”

“Aren’t you supposed to have foresight? You should already know the answer to that.”

“It doesn’t work that way for me. I don’t know who I don’t know. I can’t see possibilities and outcomes for someone I don’t know exists.”

I can’t tell her she knows us. I can’t tell her anything, but I can give her hope.

“Little sister, we are like-minded when it comes to the Reds. Forget what I said and let’s focus on the present, on what we can control right now. The Reds need to be protected. You and I can help do that. Alternating shifts of watching them. We’ll have to be stealthy and camouflage at times so we don’t draw suspicion, but I think we can pull it off for a few weeks at least.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble to go through when we should be talking to the Alphas and getting added to the Guard.”

I consider the pros and cons for a few minutes, coming to the conclusion that she’s right. Rose and Laurel will be safe with the Guard watching them, but I can’t totally trust my own people to protect the heart that beats outside of my body. The need to keep her safe myself is overpowering, demanding, and I need to be close when I can. The Guard will try to control me, so I need to go at this personal mission alone. But having my little sister on the inside...now that will be most beneficial.

“You’re right, but I think we can do what’s necessary without involving the Alphas. Talk to Alaric. He can get Fayez to let you help with the watch.”

“And what will you do?”

“Don’t worry about me. I have my end handled. We can have dinner every night to catch up on what you find out during your shifts. What do you think?”

Auri’s eyes light up at the prospect of spending more time with me. It’s not like I’ve avoided her intentionally lately, but more that I’ve had a lot on my mind and she’s too perceptive. I can’t have her meddling or finding

out about Rose. With her gift, it seemed best to keep our contact brief and lock down my thoughts when possible.

“A standing dinner date? I love that! Yes!” Jumping up and down like a child, I’m reminded of how deprived she’s been of love before she came to us. First her terrible adoptive mother, then Fenris and his band of brutes.

“Okay then. It’s a date. See you tomorrow night.” I turn and walk quickly down the path towards the golden electricity singing to my heart.

“Tomorrow night? What about the pub? And most people eat dinner every night!” she calls to my back.

“Things to do. See you tomorrow!”

My legs rush forward as my mind seeks out the tasty source of gold, barely registering the grumbling pest yelling at my back about how I’m no fun and too serious. But she’s right. I am serious and not much fun. Really, it’s how I’ve always been, but since Rose came into my life and my first and only love became something to hide rather than exult, it feels like there’s so much more at stake and I need to be on my game.

The call is overpowering and almost painful. Rose is everywhere inside of me and outside of me all at once. Walking through my village, I’m able to feel every step she’s taken like they’ve made a physical impression in the ground and left a tendril of magick for me to follow. Little breadcrumbs of energy and essence call me to follow them until my steps are halted just outside of the leathersmith’s shop and I see her.

Demure and quiet, trying not to draw attention to herself, Rose hangs back while her mother, Laurel, bargains with the Wolf in front of her.

“Sir, while I realize it’s very difficult to make your wares, I need you to take a look at this drawing and craft this item for us.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you damned Reds, so go ahead and leave before you piss me off and I do something I can’t take back.” The old man spits at her feet, but Laurel doesn’t flinch.

“This isn’t about you or me. It’s about the women who need me to help them birth your babes. If you don’t care about the next generation of your

own pack, just say so and I'll be on my way. Otherwise, take the fucking paper and talk to me like a person, not a beast!" Laurel's voice hits an octave of pissed off that I didn't think possible from the woman I met last season in the meeting hall. For some reason, it brings a smile to my face.

Rose chuckles behind her, trying desperately to hide her reaction so as not to further piss off the leathersmith.

"Fine, fine. You win, devil woman. Let me see it."

Laurel places the paper in his hand, careful not to touch his skin. "Thank you, sir."

Eyeing the design, the leathersmith scoffs in annoyance. "And what exactly is this for? Looks like a child drew it."

"Well, I'm no artist, but the mother's legs go here and here. These straps are for her to hold onto or for us to attach a rod to for her support. I only need one, but it needs to be versatile and strong enough to withstand the strength of your kind."

"Done. Three days." The large man turns to walk away from her and pauses at her voice calling to him.

"I'll need it in two at most."

"Fine. Two. Now, go away. You're bad for business."

Laurel turns to Rose and gives her a wink before the two link arms and walk towards the pub. The whispers and giggles between the two of them as they recount the interaction makes me smile. And it does something else. It makes me envious of their relationship. Sure, Daciana was a good substitute for the mother I never knew, but she wasn't warm or friendly or soft like Laurel. She was a warrior locked deep in grief raising a child that wasn't hers, a child she didn't ask for.

Even still, I believe I came to her when she most needed me, but that doesn't make the sting of never knowing my own mother any less painful.

The pub is full when they push open the door, merriment and loud talking pouring out into the normally quiet village. Almost immediately I see Auri

wrapped up in Alaric against the bar, their lips sealed together and completely lost in their own existence apart from what's going on around them.

Sneaking up on her, I slap her arm. "Ew! Stop! People are trying to enjoy their ales."

"Oh, heeyyyy!!!" she slurs back. Alaric's face reddens in a blush, but I wave him off and return my attention to my little sister.

"Yeah, looks like you didn't waste any time getting here and drinking the entire menu."

A sweet giggle bursts out of her like a tinkling melody. "I told you I was thirsty!"

"You did. Notice the Reds that you're supposed to be protecting walk in?"

She chokes on her spit. "No! Where?"

It's quite obvious where once she bothers to look. The entire bar has given them a wide berth at the corner table Laurel and Rose occupy. Rose smiles uncomfortably while Laurel appears calm like she's sitting at her own table safe in her home rather than amongst a pub full of people who hate her.

Angling my head in their direction, I tune out all noise and focus in on their conversation and the fast thrumming of Rose's heart. Blood pulses through her veins, singing to me to have a taste. But unlike the urges I used to have when I was near her, the feral urges to consume her flesh, now all I feel is lust pulsing through me.

My body hums at her closeness, the urge to take her in front of everyone consequences be damned almost overtaking my rational mind.

"How is it you're so comfortable amongst a room full of people in a village full of people who hate you for no other reason than your blood, mother?" Even from my distance, I can hear and see the suspicion laced in Rose's question.

Laurel simply sips from her mug and places it down neatly in front of her before answering. "It's very simple, Fern." I don't miss the mischievous wink Laurel gives Rose. "I'm a good person who puts out good energy and helps people as my life's purpose. You and I know the truth about what they've been told to fear. Put it this way, if it was reversed would you want them to hate you for what you didn't know?"

Rose is quiet for a while, reaching out and taking a long, deep pull from her mug of ale before putting it down less gently on the table. "When you put it like that, I suppose not. And I don't hate them. I could never or I wouldn't be here."

"Exactly. Live that truth in your actions, daughter, and they'll see your beautiful heart. They'll see there's nothing to fear and everything to gain in working together."

"You sound like grandma."

"I damn well better," Laurel chuckles. "She's the one who showed me the way with every action she took. It's her legacy that lives through me and mine through you and your sister and brother. Once we're gone from this world, however soon or long that may be, our memory can either live on through the good or bad deeds or die off through inaction. I choose to live on through the good."

Rose is quiet for a long time, hands wrapped around her mug she stares down into the amber liquid, beautiful fingers tapping softly on the glass as she thinks. Finally, she looks up with joy beaming on her lovely face.

"And I choose to live."

The smile that spreads across her face lights up the room, and I'm transfixed. Everything around me falls away. There's no sound, no feeling, no air moving through my lungs. Only her and the golden light I feel caressing my soul and soothing my darkness into submission. With those five words, Rose has spoken so much hope into what I've only seen as a painful and unknown future for the two of us.

"Eh hem." Auri clears her throat softly next to my ear and snaps me out of my reverie. "I've been talking to you for five minutes while you stare at

that Red like you've seen the sun. Snap out of it. Some are noticing your behavior towards them."

Tearing my gaze away from her, I turn back towards my sister and Alaric who both shove a mug of ale into each of my hands.

"Drink up, sis. We're relaxing."

Alaric nods next to her, his body slightly more stiff than usual. "That's right. Take a break before the babes start to arrive and things get hectic. Besides, you've been training and working hard for months. You earned a night off."

"I don't know about that, but thanks for the free drinks." Nodding at them, I tip back one mug and then the other. Slamming them down on the bar, a loud cheer of approval erupts from around us. I didn't realize everyone was so intently watching and listening to our conversation.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

The attention I gave Laurel and Rose has either drawn more curiosity or suspicion. I'll have to be extra careful from now on when I'm near her. Allowing myself to mentally slip again in Rose's presence could jeopardize her safety more than it already has. My hackles raise and the Wolf inside me whispers she wants to come out and play, to protect what's mine and stake my claim.

Cracking my neck, I release the tension my beast has caused and shrug my shoulders in an attempt to loosen them. Looking back at Auri, I realize she's staring at me in a daze while Alaric watches her out of the corner of his eye and attempts to block her from everyone else.

"What?" I snap at her more aggressively than I intended to.

Eyes quickly focusing, she looks up at me with a raised eyebrow and shifts her eyes quickly to Rose and back to me. Her head cocks to the side ever so slightly in question. It's like I can hear her snarky words without her needing to speak them.

Really, Samira?

A loud huff escapes me, and I turn to signal the barkeep for 3 more mugs. I know she just saw us. I don't know what exactly she saw, but it's obvious she knows and I don't wanna talk about it.

"Shut up and drink with me," I grumble and pass her a fresh ale.

Hours pass much in the same way, with Auri eyeing me suspiciously while I try to shut her up with drinks. Laurel and Rose spend hours in their seat letting everyone get used to seeing them and being around them. Ever the loving mother and caregiver, Laurel never drops the smile on her face.

I'm deep in conversation with Alaric about combat techniques when I sense someone close behind me at the bar.

"Excuse me, do you still have those giant ribs on the menu?" Laurel is speaking to the barkeep, a very crusty, irritable Wolf who's owned the pub since its inception.

"We do. How does a Red know about them?" Varg eyes her suspiciously, speaking to her gruffly and punctuating his question with a glob of spit on the floor.

"My mother, Iris, used to come here to help the pack many, many years ago. When I was a child, she would bring us food home. I have dreamed about those ribs for half a lifetime." Laurel beams back at him, refusing to show fear or any ill feelings at how he spoke to her.

At the mention of Iris's name, Varg visibly softens. "Iris is yer mother? I heard she was sick with the shedding disease. How far gone is she?"

"Oh, she's quite well. Thank you for asking. She's actually cured herself."

Shock crosses Varg's normally unfazed face and a few others take notice and turn to eavesdrop on their conversation. Though in a crowded pub full of Wolves, it's not really eavesdropping with our bestial hearing.

"Cured herself? Well, well, well. Glad to hear it, young lady. Tell yer mother I said hello when ya see her."

"I will, sir. How do you two know each other?"

A rare smile crosses his face and he looks away, busying himself with cleaning the bar top. “Yer mother saved my mate during a difficult childbirth. That woman is a gift to mothers and babes alike. Will she be joining ya during yer time with us?”

“I’m afraid not. While she’s cured of the disease, she’s not feeling up to much traveling or work yet. But don’t worry, she taught me everything I know and I’ve taught my daughter, Fern, everything I know. You’re in good hands.”

Varg tosses the rag he was using to wipe the bar down and nods in agreement, giving Laurel a genuine look of appreciation that makes my heart warm. “I’m sure we are. Let me get those ribs fer ya.” Turning, he walks towards the kitchen in the back with a spring in his step that I’ve never seen. It seems the Riverbourne’s reputation is farther reaching than I knew.

Laurel turns to return to her table but stops when she looks up and sees me standing next to her.

“Oh, Samira! I didn’t see you there.” Warm hands reach out and grab mine. “It’s good to see you, dear. How are you?”

“I’m good. Thank you. Getting settled in?”

“Oh, yes. The Alphas have been kind enough to allow us to stay in a cabin on the edge of the village. Our things were dropped off earlier today by the Guard. We’ll be heading over to get settled in as soon as we get some food in our bellies.”

Curiosity and the burning desire to know where Rose will be sleeping nags at me. “Which edge of the village?”

“Over by you, my dear. Understandably, people aren’t comfortable with us being here, yet. The Alphas thought we would be more comfortable next to their blood family.”

“And are you both?” I hope she gets my meaning without me having to say it, for surely she realizes I know the daughter she brought isn’t Fern.

“Of course we are. Both of us.” Laurel is a smart one, too smart if I read her correctly.

“Good. Since you both know where to find me, stop by anytime. I’ll be around to help with whatever you need.”

Squeezing my hands tightly, Laurel tries to convey her message without alerting the rest of the eyes and ears around us. “We are both most grateful to you. If you see the Alphas before I do, please convey our gratitude for the hospitality.”

“I will. Be safe, Laurel.”

“We will,” she whispers. Releasing my hands, she abruptly turns with a smile and returns back to Rose waiting at their table with eyes round like saucers.

My heart beats wildly in my chest when she looks at me, energy shooting down through our connection and hitting me like a bolt of lightning, knocking the air from my lungs.

With a small nod, she collects herself and turns back to her mother, covering her face from my view and delving deep into hushed conversation. Out of respect, I tune them out and return to Auri and Alaric who stare at me with mouths agape.

“What?” I ask incredulously. “Close your mouths. You both look ridiculous.”

“You let a Red touch you,” Alaric says quietly.

“And?”

“Aren’t you afraid?” someone next to me asks. Turning I see a young woman with curly blonde hair holding a tray of mugs.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. They’re here to help us at great risk to themselves. If they were a threat or dangerous, do you think for one second the Alphas would let them step anywhere near us?”

Murmuring starts up around me. People discussing the potential dangers and their concerns. Unlike my grandmother, I don’t tolerate their side

conversations and interrupt them loudly.

“The answer is no. No, the Alphas wouldn’t. So stop being afraid of two small women and start focusing on your individual roles in the upcoming birthing season.”

Most people nod but a few sneer in my direction. Choosing to ignore them, I yell out to the pub in a forced jovial tone. “Now who’s paying for the next round?”

The pub erupts in cheers, the previous interaction with Laurel forgotten as if they’re part of the environment as much as any of us are. While downing my next mug, I contemplate my own role in the future and what I’m going to have to do to keep them safe.

And I plot how to get Rose alone to satiate the burning in my soul and wetness between my thighs. Reaching down our connection, I caress her golden magick with my darkness, a shiver and moan of desire burning through me in answer.

CHAPTER 26

ROSE

Sweat coats my skin as I sit up in bed, my surroundings unfamiliar and terrifying in the near pitch black room. The sheets and blankets touching my skin are soft, almost luxurious in comparison to my threadbare ones back home. Pine needles, earth, freshly chopped wood, and a hint of animal invade my senses, instantly reminding me of where I am.

The pack cabin. A huff bursts out of me as I flop back on the down pillow. I don't even know where they found goose feathers for it, having not seen one in my lifetime. Mother's gentle breathing is barely audible across the other side of the cabin, but reaching out my magick I can feel her and know she's safe. It's a stupid thing to risk using my magick in the literal Wolf den when I could walk to her room and peek inside safely, and I chastise myself for the weakness.

Samira is close. I can feel her sleeping in her bed a short distance away, calling to me in her sleep to come curl up beside her warm body, to wrap myself in her embrace and feel whole again. But I'm not here for me, and I can't have what I want. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Being among people who hate me through nothing more than ignorance has given me some perspective, and I wonder if one day we'll be able to work past our differences and abolish the suppressive laws. This outreach

in the Wolves' time of need is a step in the right direction, but I hope and pray to the Gods it won't take a lifetime to happen.

I've missed her so much these past months. I can't sleep. I can't eat. All I do is try to distract myself only to always circle my thoughts back around to her. Shutting me out from our connection has hurt more than I'm willing to admit. Though I'm sure she has a good reason for it, I'm still angry and need to hear the explanation from her lips.

Her lips...

Just the thought of them has me warming to an uncomfortable temperature as I tingle all over and throbs build between my thighs.

Maybe I'll just reach out for a second. Just for a brief touch.

Opening our bond, I reach my golden magick down the short distance to her. She's asleep and vulnerable, unable to completely shut me out right now, and I take full advantage of that. Caressing her and whispering into her mind, I soak in the essence that is my love, my Samira.

I miss you. I love you.

Shock shoots back through our bond as she wakes and becomes aware of the connection. With a dark caress that sends shivers through my body and desire burning me from the inside, she shuts it down and everything goes back to nothingness.

A deep throb starts in my chest and is quickly replaced by searing pain. Feeling like I'm about to rip in half from the inside out, I roll to my side and curl in on myself, clutching my knees to my chest. It's not her fault we can't be together. Shutting me down feels more like self preservation than rejection, but it doesn't make the hurt any less.

Tears soak my pillow for hours, but I eventually fall into a fitful sleep fraught with nightmares of fires and blood.



“Rose, it’s time to wake up.”

Mother is cheerily flitting about my room, throwing open curtains, laying out my clothing for the day, smiling like she doesn’t have a care in the world. It’s strange how comfortable she is among the pack, almost like she’s a different person and I need to know why.

“Ugh. I didn’t sleep well. Just a little more sleep, please, mother.” Burying my head under a pillow, I instantly fall back into sleep but sudden light jolts me back awake. Cracking open my eyes, mother stands at my bedside, pillow in hand with an annoyed look on her face.

“Absolutely not, young lady. We have things to do. Get up. Get dressed. Get moving. Now.” Tossing the pillow on the foot of the bed, she floats from the room and sings back over her shoulder. “Breakfast is ready!”

Why is she so happy? It’s annoying given how exhausted I am and where we are. The schedule for the day is full of meetings with mothers and quick exams if they’ll allow it. The two Wolf midwives will be joining us to help ease tensions and catch us up on each case, but still I’m beyond nervous about walking into Wolf homes.

Wig double pinned and secured, head wrap attached on top, I don my midwife shift and apron and meet mother at the breakfast table.

“Took you long enough. We have a lot of work to do in a short amount of time, Rose. I need you totally focused on what we’re doing here.” She’s chastising me, but I’m not entirely certain why.

“I’m focused, mother, but you clearly have something else to say so just say it.”

She takes a sip of her coffee, assessing me over the brim before placing it down on the table and taking a deep breath.

“Rose, I saw the way the Alphas’ granddaughter looked at you. I know she was assigned to follow you through the forest on deliveries to grandma. In fact, I asked for her to be assigned to follow you, to protect you even though she didn’t know that’s what she was doing.”

I’m stunned by the revelation and sit back in my chair, jaw dropped, looking at my simple, sweet mother like she’s a stranger.

“How—how did you ask for her to be assigned to follow me? You’re a village healer and herbalist, nothing more. How do you have any pull with the Alphas?”

“Not so much me, dear. More your grandma. She was a trusted ally of the Alphas before she got the shedding disease. All I had to do was speak her name. Your grandma is a very powerful, well connected woman.”

“Hmm. I’m seeing that. You said the pub owner knew her when you were a child. What was she doing here?”

“Rose, I always thought keeping secrets from you children was protecting you. You can’t be punished for what you don’t know, right? But now, I see I’ve done you a disservice. Bear might not need to know the intricacies of Red-Wolf relationships through our history, but I think you’re at a place in life where you really need to know.”

“And what place is that?”

“Your power, Rose. Your power and your love. I feel it and see it.”

My breathing freezes before I’m able to regain my composure enough to speak. “How? I tried to hide it from you to—”

“Protect me?” she interrupts.

“Yes.”

“As I said, secrets don’t always protect. Sometimes they send us into danger without the knowledge we need to do the right thing.”

“Did you know I was different before I told you about my magick manifesting?”

“Yes. It was a tingle. Just a small tingle shooting from my heart to my fingertips one night. And then when you healed Samira in the river, I felt it in a rush just like I was there with you in the water. Maybe it’s our blood that allows us to feel things so deeply, I really don’t know. What I do know is you are gifted, dear daughter. I knew it before I saw you born. I felt it with you inside of my body still. You are more special than any of us know, and I will keep your secret even if it means death.”

Reaching across the table, I wrap her hand in both of mine and look deeply into her eyes. “It won’t come to that, mother. I’ll protect you.”

“You won’t have to, my sweet one. I might not have magick, but I have a gift of my own. Kindness. You’ve seen the way Wolves respond to me. I’ll win them over. We both will.”

And I’m certain she’s right, though something feels like it’ll need to be settled first. It’s not going to be as easy as she thinks. I feel something dark, dangerous lurking on the edges, just out of reach so I can’t touch it with my magick.

“Alright, then. Let’s start winning them over, mother. We have mothers to see. Better get moving.”

Pushing away from the table, I grab my bag and head for the door, mother chuckling softly behind me.

“What’s so funny?”

“You,” she beams back at me.

“What did I do?”

“Oh, nothing.” Her voice is sing-song, amused. Something I’ve not heard in a long time but I put it out of my mind and fling open the door only to come to a screeching stop when I see Samira perched on the porch rails. Dressed from head to toe in black leather, looking like a dangerous snack I want to devour, she smirks at me when she sees the shock and color drain from my face.

“Good morning, Fern. I’m here to walk you and your mother to your house calls today.”

My mouth is instantly salivating as I take in her thigh muscles taught and testing the seams of her leather pants. The cropped leather jacket only highlights the barely there fabric of the shirt underneath where her flawless skin peeks out, daring me to run my fingers over her abs.

“Samira!” Mothers excited voice interrupts my lusty shock and jolts me back to reality. “I’m so glad to see you. Apologies if we kept you waiting. Fern overslept.” She leans in and whispers as if it’s necessary with Wolf hearing. “Fitful sleep and all that.”

“Bad dreams, Fern?” Samira smirks, her eyes twinkling. “Well, I’ll do my best to make you more—” she clears her throat before continuing. “--- comfortable so you sleep like the Gods tonight.” Her meaning isn’t lost on me or my body as my thighs clench together in a vain attempt to stop the obnoxiously growing ache.

“That’s so kind of you, but I’ll manage.” I smirk back, slightly annoyed at her toying with me in front of my mother. “Shall we?”

“Of course,” she smiles. With swift and agile movements, she hops from the rails and lands on the ground below. “Come along, ladies. Places to go, people to meet. I’d like to be done before dinner or I’m liable to be cranky and eat anyone in sight.”

Her words and underhanded meaning make me slip on a step, only catching myself after bouncing off a few of them.

“Oh, Fern! Are you all right, darling?” Mother reaches down to pick me up off of the step my ass has planted on. The look in her eyes tells me she knows what’s going on, something I’m damned sure going to grill her on later.

“Fine. I’m fine. Let’s go.”

Without another word, I trudge off down the path, unaware of where I need to be going but trying to outrun my embarrassment.



Samira stands guard after brief introductions at ten homes. By the last one, I'm emotionally exhausted from trying to hide my true nature and fit the mold of Fern. Our visits have given me the chance to learn the village, and I lead the way down the path, single-mindedly walking back towards our cabin to wash up, eat, and go to bed early. Maybe tonight I'll actually sleep, but the energy pouring from Samira and invading my senses says otherwise.

Mother hurries to catch up with me, grabbing my forearm to slow me down to a more leisurely pace. "Don't want them to think we're running away, Fern."

"Of course not, mother. Just tired." But I take the cue and slow my steps, Samira much too close behind us. "They all seemed very nice once they got used to us being there. The two pack midwives were nice, too, though I'm so tired I can't remember their names."

"Yara and Zara. They're capable but young. Samira, do you know who they learned their skills from? I didn't have a chance to ask."

"Their grandmother. She died a few years ago before they were able to apprentice under her for very long. A lot of knowledge went with her to the next life, unfortunately."

Mother clicks her tongue. "That's a shame. Something I've learned in my lifetime, you can't replace lost knowledge so it's best to learn what you can with the time you have."

I grunt in agreement, holding her hand close to my body. My mother has been a source of comfort and strength for many, myself included. Hearing her speak so freely and spending this time with her is only growing my respect and love for her even more. I'm able to see her through the eyes of an adult and not those of her child, and for that I'll be eternally grateful to the Wolves for calling on us for help. Even if we're not entirely safe here.

Dried leaves crunch quietly and squish down in the mud under small feet and draw my attention up the hill to our right. Mother walks along without a worry, so I know she didn't hear it but Samira closes the distance to our backs with two strides. Her new defensive position puts me on high alert. Willing my body to remain calm and loose, I reach out with my magick searching for any threat, any energy that might be too close for the wrong reasons.

And then something snaps at it.

"Ouch!" I blurt out.

"What? Are you okay?" Samira rushes up beside me, tactically placing her body between me and the potential threat.

"Fern? What's wrong?" Mother looks slightly concerned but not overly since she's aware of my tendency to be accident prone.

"I'm fine. Just an annoying bug bite or something. Nothing to be worried about." I hope she understands my meaning, but the way she runs her eyes up and down my body in an inspection shows she doesn't.

"Samira. I'm fine. Annoying bug." I stress my words and then it finally clicks and she sighs.

"My apologies for my annoying, meddling little sister." Turning to the trees, Samira shouts up with an exasperated tone. "Come on out, pest!"

A soft breeze caresses my face, followed by a few very faint, small steps, and here she is. Standing in front of me is a small woman, not much bigger than myself, with blonde hair and brown eyes. The beautiful slanted shape of her eyes is similar to Samira's, but where Samira has flecks of gold in her deep brown eyes, Auri has bright flecks of yellow. But their smiles, those are identical.

"Hi! I'm Auri." She reaches out her hand and grabs mine without waiting for me to accept her touch and does the same to my mother. "It's so nice to finally meet you both. Laurel and um, Fern. Is that right?"

"Yes! It's so nice to meet Samira's sister." Mother clutches onto her hand like they are old friends and pulls her in for a hug. "You are just stunning,

my dear. I don't think I've ever seen a Wolf quite like you. The males must be going wild for you," she giggles. Giggles...seriously! My mother giggles.

Auri leans in close like they are old friends, not a bit shy or uncomfortable. "Well, maybe a few," she whispers back.

"Ew! Can we not, Auri?" Samira looks down on her sister with a deep set frown.

"This one can't handle the details," she winks at my mother.

"This one doesn't want to hear about her sister's sex life," Samira deadpans back.

"Oh to be young!" Mother laughs and pats Auri's hand. "It really is a pleasure to meet you, Auri. You know where we are. Come around anytime."

"Oooh, a standing invitation. I'll be taking you up on that." Auri really is beautiful as she beams back at my mother. She's so different from my Samira who's always so serious in public and never playful.

"And you'll regret the invitation very soon, Laurel. Pest here doesn't understand personal boundaries." Samira thumps her sister on the back of the head and is ignored like it's commonplace.

"She's so serious. I think a good lay would solve half of her problems," Auri states bluntly.

I choke on my spit, bending over at the waist in an attempt to cough it up and gain my air back. When I stand back up with tears running down my face, everyone is staring at me.

"What?" I cough out, my voice hoarse and gravelly.

"Oh nothing!" Mother sings. "Let's go get some food and sleep. It seems some of us can't stand still and swallow at the same time."

Samira chuckles behind me as my mother and Auri turn and link arms, walking and chatting like old friends. It's moments like this that I forget we're in the literal Wolf den with a lot of people who want us dead.

CHAPTER 27

ROSE

“Report.” Reika sits on her throne with Rikon at her side, while her greatest warrior and head of the Guard, Fayez, stands before her with some members of the Guard at his back.

“Nothing to report outside of the pack, Alpha, but within the pack the tensions seem to fade daily the more our guests interact with people. Varg in particular has taken a liking to them both and spreads a good word to his customers.”

“And what of those who’ve left us because of the Reds visit?” Rikon looks vigilant, like he knows something the rest of us don’t.

Fayez stands tall and takes a deep breath before delivering his news. “We’ve tracked two groups to the human village and one to the forest near the easternmost peak. It seems both are trying to survive. The women with them have been heard urging the men to come back and seek forgiveness for doubting their Alpha’s word, but so far pride and distrust has kept them away.”

“And do they suffer? Do they need supplies to help them on their new journeys?” Always concerned for her pack, Reika hasn’t given up on them even if they’ve given up on her, for now.

“I had Alaric reach out to them and they denied any help. We’ll try again in a few weeks and keep a close eye on them, but for now it’s my

recommendation to let them try to live as they wish. They may find it harder to live without their pack than they thought.”

“Wise words, warrior. You and the Guard are to maintain your close watch on the defectors and the Red visitors. I want no violence or tension in the pack. This is to be a joyful time for all of us. I trust you to resolve any disputes or concerns peacefully and come to me if you can’t.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Dismissed.” With a wave of her hand, Reika sends them away and calls forward the next persons in line.

Laurel and Rose.

“Laurel. Do you and your daughter have a report for me this fine morning?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Mother bows her head and nudges me to do the same.

It’s the first time I’ve been in the meeting hall and seen the Alphas. Having read about them in May’s journals, I thought they would be terrifying in person, but they look like younger versions of my grandma. Maybe a bit larger and more muscled, but the eyes are the same. Knowing and kind, but always assessing and planning like they’re waiting on something to happen. They’re the eyes of those who’ve lived multiple lives and seen things I don’t dare dream about.

“My, my, Laurel. You daughters are almost copies of each other. Does this daughter speak more than the other? She was quite shy, if I remember correctly.”

Holding my chin up, I step forward and address her before my mother has the chance to. “Yes, Alpha, I speak. Some would say too much for their own liking.”

Rikon lets out a guttural laugh, breaking the serious facade he was trying so hard to hold onto. “And she’s funny! Good! We could use some humor. These women are so damn serious lately.” He gestures towards Reika, Samira, and her Aunt Daciana at her side.

“Not all of us are uptight asses, grandfather!” Auri shouts from Samira’s other side, earning her an elbow to the ribs.

“Moving along,” Reika grumbles over the soft laughter. “Laurel, your report.”

For a mind-numbing long time, my mother gives an account of her actions since arriving among the pack. She pulls out her writing journal and gives a run down of who will need extra medical attention and what she predicts as the outcome for the most difficult births. The Alphas listen intently and nod while I zone out and do something I’m sure I’ll have to pay for later.

With as little magick as I can muster, I reach down the bond I have with Samira and stroke the dark wall she’s erected to keep me out. Just a little and with very little of my power, but I stroke it nonetheless. And then I pull back as if I did nothing at all, leaving her visibly more stiff and trying to decide if she imagined it.

Unable to control myself, the corners of my mouth turn up in a slight smirk only to be quickly stifled by what feels like a slap on the fabric of our magickal bond.

Did she just—? Well, that’s new.

My curiosity peaked, it takes every ounce of willpower I can manage not to act out or reach back out to her. Instead, I stand there with my eyes to the ground while my mother prattles on like her and the Alphas are old friends.

Finally, fecking finally, she’s done talking and we’re dismissed with an order to appear in two more days with an update. And I practically run from the meeting hall so I can have a few minutes of time to myself back in the cabin to toy with Samira.

Is it juvenile? Sure. Is it risky? Absolutely. Am I bored and missing the feck out of the other half of my heart? Yes and yes! I need a connection with her even if we can’t touch each other. Spending the entire day before with her just a few steps from me has driven me to the point of madness.

My chest heaves with exertion when I finally make it to the cabin and fling myself down on the bed, feeling elated and a little excited for the

first time in a long time. Closing my eyes, I work to calm my heartbeat and steady my breathing, focusing on the golden magick inside of my chest. Stretching and shrinking, growing in power and pulling the power back, I flex my magick like I would stiff muscles to loosen them up.

The same feeling of blood returning to overused fingers trickles into the thick thread of my magick and slowly creeps down the bond I share with Samira. Sliding along her wall, I prod for a break, for an opening, and after much effort I'm relieved when I find a tiny gap. Thinning my magick to the tiniest thread, I slide it into the small space and feel around, finding her darkness dormant deep inside.

A smile spreads across my face at my next thought, and I can't resist coiling around her darkness and trailing down the length of it with the tip of my gold. Just a tease, a feather light tickling, a gentle promise of what's to come if I can get her alone. Understanding must hit her because her walls come crashing down and the darkness inside comes alive with an aggression that reminds me of the last time we were together.

"Hello, my Rose," she growls in my mind.

"Samira. Finally letting me inside, I see," I purr back at her, rushing in my full power to meet hers.

"Trying to get us caught and bring the pack down on our heads, I see." She chastises me, but her tone gives away her amusement at my audacity.

"What can I say? The temptation was too much to resist."

"Do it again so publicly, little Red, and I'll do more than give you a slap?"

Muscles in my abdomen tighten as tingles rush through my core at the threat, the beautifully tempting threat.

"I'm not afraid of the big bad Wolf, Samira."

"You should be," she growls, her darkness bursting free of my golden coils and smothering it.

She's right. I should be afraid. Any normal, logical person would be, but what Samira and I have goes beyond any fear. I trust her with my secret

and my heart, and she trusts me with hers, with whatever this darkness is and what it may mean if she's discovered. Our risk is mutual, though we both fully realize my punishment will be terminable if I'm discovered.

Even still, beneath her suffocating darkness my golden magick thrums and pulses with excitement. With barely contained power. We can both feel I'm so much more than has been discovered, but that doesn't matter right now. What matters is the feeling that's racing through me as she claims her dominance and exerts her strength over me.

"I will never be afraid of you, Samira. Never," I pant out through the breath-taking pressure she's exerting on me. Shaky hands run down the front of my body, pulling my skirt up to expose my quivering thighs. Timidly, I pull my panties to the side and coast my fingers along my crease. "I wish it was you here touching me instead."

A deep rumble vibrates down our bond and the heady scent of her arousal fills my nostrils. "I wish it were you here touching me, my Rose." Voice deeper and full of want and promise, she sends a pulse down our bond and I know it's what she feels right now as she touches her pussy.

Dipping two fingers inside, I return the sensation down our connection, my golden magick feeling like it's building embers in a fire. An audible moan escapes me before I'm able to stifle myself.

"Sammie, my love, I wish you were here. I need to feel you on my body, to kiss you, to taste you. I need to hear your heart beating so mine can align itself in the rhythm of our love."

"Rose, my Rose. These should be your fingers and those should be mine. But for now, I want you to close your eyes tight and imagine I'm right there with you. My scent, my tongue, my fingers. All around you. All over you. There are no barriers right now, little Red. Your Wolf is owning you just like you need me to." My thighs squeeze together and halt my motions before she utters her next sentence. "Now fuck yourself with those beautiful fingers and scream my name down this fucking bond," she commands with a deep, feral, Alpha order that I don't want to resist.

I'm sent over the edge, fucking myself with my fingers, grinding my pussy up into my hand. My other hand seeks out my breasts and alternates

squeezing my nipples punishingly just as she would.

“Samira, you feel so good! Harder!”

Her growl reverberates inside of my mind, her darkness squeezing tightly on my golden magick, nearly cutting off the air into my lungs with the pressure. Sensations assault me with a vengeance down our connection. Samira’s own pleasure building inside of my head, her soft pants and muffled cries send me hurtling towards climax quicker than I expect.

“Rose, fuck, Rose! Your sweet lips around my clit, your fingers pounding inside of me. Harder! Grind your pretty cunt down on my face harder.”

A mental image assaults me of straddling her face while I bend over and eat her pretty pussy.

“Gods, baby. Is this what you’re thinking of right now?” I groan.

“Fuck, yes. I want you to smother me between your thighs while I feast on you. I want you to taste me, bite me, fuck me with your fingers, and send me over the edge and cum with me. Drown me in your pleasure, Rose. Drown me and I’ll gladly die a happy woman between your thighs.”

Her words, the image, the violent storm of an orgasm building inside of me all come crashing down in a huge wave of ecstasy. My magick turns into an exploding star beneath her darkness, sending it airborne in our mental space. Moans and cries race back towards me as she finds her release alongside mine. Our mutual climaxes go on for what feels like hours, my body writhing and sweat beading on my skin.

Finally, it starts to recede and morphs into shivers that eventually dissipate. Pulling my hands from my body, I lay there staring at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath. Twining our powers together in an embrace, we stay like that for a while before reluctantly pulling away from each other.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“And I love you.”

And then her walls are back up and she’s gone.

CHAPTER 28

SAMIRA

It's been two excruciating months since Rose and Laurel came to stay with my pack. Two months of teasing looks and magickal caresses, of her melodic voice and gentle presence, but nothing more. Her scent is everywhere, making me grow more insane with yearning by the day.

But soon, their time here will come to a close, and even the random glances and her maddening scent will be a thing of the past. I don't know what we're going to do once she's gone back home, but for the moment there's no solution.

Grumblings among the pack are almost nonexistent since they've delivered all but one of our pack babies. All successfully, even the most difficult cases. Laurel took the time to train our own midwives so they would be prepared in the future. That gesture meant more than she probably knows. She's cemented a safe space for herself and her daughter among us as our guests. Trust is hard to come by with Wolves, even more so for Reds. The deeply engrained hatred seems to be something of another lifetime when it comes to these two women.

I only hope it will extend beyond the pack boundaries once they've returned home. Surely the pack can see they're good people and no longer a threat to us.

As for me, the more I'm around them and the more I stalk and watch Rose without her knowing, it's only further affirmation that they were never a threat to begin with. How can people so kind and caring have ever been thought to be evil? It's something I'm determined to find out, but for now, I sit among a thick copse of forest and look down upon the village, never taking my eyes off of my little Red.

"Boo!"

The sudden interruption makes me jump and I nearly topple over into the dirt. Auri laughs hysterically from behind me and comes to plop down at my side, not minding dirtying her spring dress.

"I can't believe you didn't hear me coming! What are you doing up here all alone?" Her prying eyes search the people milling about down below and stop when they land on Rose who is bending down to talk to a small boy. "Ah, your little Red distracting you again?"

"She's not my Red," I grumble. "And I'm just watching her to maintain her safety."

"Pffttt! I call bullshit. You and I both know her and her sweet mother are completely safe here now. The pack is grateful for what they've done for us. Might as well move in, if you ask me," she teases with an elbow jab to my ribs, the usual mischievous twinkle making an appearance in her yellow eyes.

"Well, no one asked you, so shut it."

"Ooohh, grumpy. What's wrong? Haven't gotten any tail in a while?"

"This is so not a conversation I'm having with you, Auri. Drop it." My tone comes out more threatening than I intend, but she quickly backtracks.

Holding her hands up in submission, she attempts to placate my anger. "Fine, fine. Sorry, big sister. I just hate to see you so miserable and broody."

"I'm not miserable or broody."

"You are. Word of advice?"

“You’re going to give it to me whether I want it or not so go ahead.”

“Love is hard to come by and hard to keep. No matter the cost, it’s always worth fighting for.”

My head snaps over in her direction, pulling my eyes away from Rose who’s now sorting through flowers and chatting with the merchant. “Who said anything about love? What have you heard?”

“I haven’t heard anything. It’s what I see. You forget my power is foresight.” A sharp nail taps the middle of her forehead. “I see your love. I see your mate. And I see flashes of strife and pain and violence. You’ll have to fight for her, Sammie, and at times fight alongside her. Fight because both of your lives will depend on it. Many lives will depend on both of you. It feels like something bigger is coming, but it’s just black smoke.”

Her words suck the air from my lungs and the moisture from my mouth. Being forced to fight for our love isn’t anything I didn’t already know, but hearing it from her makes it all the more real. Swallowing deeply, I lick my lips in a failed attempt to regain some moisture to speak.

“And what do you see in the black smoke? What do you see through it?”

“Nothing. It’s so thick and tastes and smells like ash and soot. Feels like darkness and fury.” She shivers involuntarily and pulls her sweater around her body, hugging it to her tightly.

I have no words, only a loud sigh escapes me. Rose and the love I have for her is worth it all, but I wish I knew what the threat was so I could be prepared.

Auri sits next to me quietly for a long time, watching Rose interact with our pack and move about like she’s one of us, but better. She’s like purity and love and goodness wrapped in a small body and radiates all of that outward. Everyone who comes in contact with her is left with a smile, and I find myself smiling down while I watch her.

“I see why you love her so much. She’s very special,” Auri says wistfully, her own smile coming through in her voice.

“She is. So much more than you know.”

Or does she know? Has Auri already seen Rose’s truth through her foresight? I don’t yet have the courage to ask.



I awake the next morning to a bustle in the village. People move about in a hurry, cleaning and arranging their shops and wares, carrying things here and there. Energy buzzes through the air with excitement and promise.

Coming out of the pub with my large coffee in hand, I stop a young woman rushing towards the meeting hall with a large basket full of flowers.

“What’s going on? Why’s everyone so hurried this morning?”

“Didn’t you hear? The last babe was born last night, and the Alpha has called for a special celebration to welcome all of the new babes to the pack. Rumor has it, she has something special in store for the two Reds.”

“Huh. That’s good news. Thank you.” Waving her off, I turn to find Daciana.

Thoughts race through my head of what the Alpha could have in store for Laurel and Rose. It should be good, but if something went wrong it could be something terrible. I can only hope it’s good news until I can find Daciana and get the details. I can’t believe no one woke me up. Hell, I can’t believe I slept so soundly that I didn’t wake myself up during the night. It’s been a long time since I had a full night of sleep, and I don’t even remember going to bed last night. Must’ve been exhausted, I think as I see Daciana coming down the path towards me.

“There you are. Where have you been all morning, Samira?” She says it accusingly, like I was off burning down villages rather than sleeping in my bed for a change.

“In bed. Asleep. Why didn’t you wake me with whatever news you have?”

“Asleep? You never sleep.”

“I know, but I did so let’s hear it already. What’s going on with the last babe and the Reds?”

“Baby and mother are fine. It was a bad one, though. Almost lost them both a few times, but that Laurel and her daughter are something special. I heard they kicked everyone out of the cabin in preparation for delivering a stillborn, and moments after they were alone healthy cries could be heard from the baby. The father rushed back in to find mother and baby doing just fine. Everyone is convinced they have a gift from the Gods and performed a miracle.”

Something tells me Rose used her magick to save the baby, but I don’t dare say it aloud for fear of being overheard. There’s no way Rose would let someone die. It’s not in her nature to allow it if she can save them. Having seen and felt her gift, I know that’s what happened.

“So what’s this special thing the Alphas have in store for the Reds?”

“No idea, but something tells me things are going to change around here.” Daciana looks forlorn with a sad smile spreading across her face. She’s killed Reds in her time, probably too many to count. She was there when the laws were put in place and has firsthand knowledge of the past. The look on her face right now makes me want to ask more, but just as I’m about to she changes the subject quickly. “Come along, Samira. I’m sure the Alphas want to meet with the blood family before they address the entire pack.”

I nod and walk silently behind her, praying to the Gods for good news, for a change, for freedom from the laws that keep my Rose away from me.

The meeting hall is filled to capacity. Bodies line the interior walls and stand outside around open windows. Clearing her throat, Daciana stands behind a crowd of people blocking the open door. Annoyed eyes snap up to her but quickly become wide with recognition. They all move back and make way for us to walk inside where my eyes instantly find Rose and

Laurel seated in the front row. Taking the steps down in a hurried pace, I follow Daciana up the dais and take a seat at the Alphas' table.

Reika and Rikon are already holding hands under the table, my grandfather making small circles of comfort with his thumb. She looks nervous but not angry, so that's a good sign. The Guard is posted strategically around the room with Fayez standing closest to the Reds. It's then that I realize what the Alphas are planning for.

Violence.

My heart begins beating wildly in my chest, trying to force its way through my tissue. Throat tight, Wolf growling internally, my need to protect Rose and Laurel is almost too much to control.

A small movement in my periphery draws my attention and my muscles start to grow in preparation for an attack. But then I see her. Auri is casually lounging against the wall closest to me inspecting her nails as if she's bored. Sensing I'm watching her, a smirk spreads across her face. That little pest knew I was about to lose my mind, but there she is all calm like it's just another day.

If she's not worried and, in fact, the exact opposite then she must have seen something. She must know there's nothing to be worried about. That sets my Wolf at ease, and I relax back in my chair.

"My pack, my family," Reika's voice booms and everyone immediately falls silent, giving her their full attention. "This has been a time of great hardship and great joy for our pack. We have an entire generation of new little ones who will soon be running at our heels and causing some much needed mischief in our village. Every single baby and mother is healthy and happy thanks to our midwives, Yara and Zara." She motions down at the two Wolf midwives who stand from their seats next to Laurel and Rose with no concerns or trepidation. They look proud to be in the company of Reds, something I've never seen.

"And thanks to the two Red midwives who came among us at great personal risk with nothing but care in their hearts for us." Her hand extends towards the Reds, who are pulled to their feet by their Wolf midwife companions. "Laurel, we owe you and your daughter a great

debt.” Laurel beams and bows her head in gratitude towards the Alphas, but Rose keeps her eyes downcast shyly as applause erupts throughout the hall.

That’s interesting, I think to myself. I didn’t realize she was so shy when she’s so friendly out in the village.

Rose should be holding her head high, proud of what they’ve done here, not staring at the ground. Reaching down our bond, I caress the golden threads I feel tethered tightly around the box she keeps them locked to.

“Hold your head up, little Red. You have much to be proud of today,” I say down our bond.

Slowly, her green eyes rise and lock on mine, and a small smile flits across her lips before it disappears.

When the cheers and applause die down, Reika stands and continues. “This has not been an easy birthing season for anyone involved, but with the strength of Wolves, the knowledge of generations, and new friends who’ve led us through the most dire parts, we are now at a time of great celebration. By order of the Alphas, the remainder of the Blooming Season will be a celebration of life. Eat, drink, and be joyous!”

Cheers erupt around the room, and I find myself falling into the merriment and forgetting about the fears I harbor. Banging on the table, the blood family gives their approval for the Alphas’ decree. Reika and Rikon smile bigger than I’ve ever seen.

When the cheers finally stop and the hall turns into loud chatter, Reika and Rikon make their way around to the front of the dais and stand looking down on their pack. The room falls into a hush and people take their seats.

“Now, my pack, we have a gift for our new Red friends to repay them for everything they’ve done for us.” Soothing, like the grandfather I know in private, Rikon’s voice instills a sense of calm in the room. This is a power move, a calculated and well thought out choice for him to deliver whatever comes next instead of Reika with her booming, authoritative voice.

“My pack, it’s been a long time since we enacted the laws against the Reds. A long time since we wiped out their magick through violence and

hate. Some of you may remember the events that lead up to the Burning Times, but for those of you who don't I'm not going to talk about the past. It's much too painful, but what I will say is grief and pain can make normally sane people do terrible things. And many, many lifetimes ago, Reika and I allowed the worst kind of pain to cloud our judgment and our actions affected every living being on Cordova. Those effects are still felt today and are part of our histories, part of their histories. But now, it's time for change. Change can be scary but your Alphas are asking you to trust us and be open minded."

Loud thrumming pounds in my ears as my blood rushes through my veins. I look over at Favez who's inched closer to Rose and Laurel in a protective stance. Running my eyes around the room, I can see the rest of the Guard in the same stance, on high alert. The energy in the room is excited but tense, making my own instincts kick in. I need to protect her, protect them. Pushing my chair back, I go to stand but a small hand appears on my shoulder and pushes me back down with more strength than I thought she could muster.

"Calm," whispers Auri. "It's going to be alright. Caaalllmmm," she soothes. She doesn't move away, nor does she take her hand from my shoulder.

Reika takes over and addresses the pack. "Rikon and I have made a lot of mistakes, but the one I regret the most is taking out my grief on an entire community of people. Laurel and Fern Riverbourne, I, Reika the Red, Alpha and leader of the Wolves, Mother of the late Diona and Damon, Mother of the warrior Daciana, and grandmother of Samira and Aureadna, do hereby offer my sincerest apologies for the atrocities brought down on the Reds and lift the laws that bind all of you."

Audible gasps sound in unison and a few exclamations of anger and shock join them. A few angry males step into the aisle and walk a few steps down towards Laurel and Rose, shouting at the Alpha.

"You're making a mistake!"

"But they could still be dangerous!"

"These two are safe, but what about the rest of them?"

The Guard quietly moves in on them, but Rikon holds up his hand, stopping them in their advances and silencing any protests.

“Your Alpha has spoken. This is not a decision we come to lightly, but one that is well past time. Before you were born, before any of you were born, when we were young pups Reds and Wolves lived peacefully in harmony and the lands prospered here. There was no violence, no hate, no illness, no unnatural death. Both sides lived until they chose to move on to the next. Magick covered the land in beauty before something dark started to creep in and overtake our utopia.”

“What was it?” I blurt out, unable to control my curiosity.

“The darkness that I speak of was a lot of things. Greed started it. There were those who became unable to be fulfilled in living the simple lives we had. Those who wanted more, who wanted what others had, and who took it. Very quickly envy and hate took over and everything crumbled after that. Wolves began bullying the Reds and that turned into outright violence. Then Reika came into power as the Alpha and I alongside her. We had our own feelings to wrestle with and were unable to see far outside of the fog to remember our peaceful past. Then we lost Diona and our last bit of compassion fell away. And now, here we are—”

Reika reaches down and entwines her fingers with Rikon’s, bringing their joined hands back up to her heart. “---trying to fix our mistakes and heal the people of Cordova and this land.”

Everyone is silent. Silent and still for much too long, but then someone in the front row stands and turns to face the pack.

“Laurel and her daughter saved me and my baby last night. We both would be dead right now, if not for them. No matter the past, no matter our blood, no matter our differences, they will always be family to me and mine. The Reds of the past, who we were brought up to believe were dangerous, are no more. We are lucky to have these women in our lives right when we needed them. If this is the least we can do to show our gratitude then I say we do it.”

Women holding babies clutched to their chests stand and move beside the other in solidarity. And then they do something in unison that I’ve never

seen done to anyone other than the Alpha herself. Holding those babies tight to their bodies, they all turn to Laurel and Rose and fall to their knees, bowing their heads to the ground in supplication. It's the most respectful gesture among our pack, symbolizing complete faith, trust, and love.

Throat tightening, eyes watering, I'm barely holding it together if it wasn't for Auri's fingers squeezing my shoulder to a painful level and grounding me. My heart soars at the sight, at the love my. Wolves have for my. Red.

Something blooms in my chest that I haven't allowed myself to feel because before this moment the future of Rose and I was unclear. But now—now it feels like it might be possible. I'm not sure what removing the laws means exactly or if it will allow Reds and Wolves to bond again, but for once I'm feeling it...

Hope.

CHAPTER 29

ROSE

Mother and I took the good news back to the Crimson Valley and our people, but not before we discussed it with grandma and the rest of our family. Grandma was elated at the news, convinced the hardships of the past were going to soon be a distant memory. Father was cautiously optimistic, warning all of us to not forget there's a history between our two peoples and that history didn't just disappear with some fancy words. Bear. Well, Bear was just Bear. Obviously innocent. I think he was more excited to be able to make new friends his age than anything else.

For now, we've decided our family will continue our lives as if the laws still exist. We'll wear our red capes when outside of the village and interact with the Wolves after sending a letter and setting up meetings. Opening trades seems to be the safest first step, but I want to forgo everything we agreed to when my heart pounds and cries and screams in my chest for Samira.

With only one person to confide in, I find myself sitting down for tea at grandma's table. Her hut has evolved since she's been home. Once resembling my own, it now seems to be covered inside and out in vines and plants. There's a firepit out back between the house and the river and the garden has tripled in size. It's like she's a different person, a curious

and inquisitive person. And I'm finding myself more drawn to this new version of her than my younger self was before she became sick.

The tea hits my throat piping hot and scalding but then the herbs take effect, and I find myself relaxing and the thoughts in my head becoming quieter. Instantly, I zero in on Samira's dark energy flitting about in the forest. Well, not exactly flitting. More like brooding.

I don't have the courage to test the limits of no longer being bound by laws, and I feel her getting more frustrated every time she reaches out through our bond and I shoot my electric current at her and make her retreat. It's like a fucked up game of cat and mouse. She's tenacious, but I can't give in, yet. I'm scared and need some perspective and more information. I still don't fully understand why this all happened. I mean, Diona died and grief can do terrible things to a normally logical person's thought process but I still can't understand why it went so far or lasted so long.

"What are you thinking, dear?" Grandma sits across from me, sipping her tea and assessing me with her knowing vision.

"I'm curious why this all happened to the extent it did. It feels like there has to be more than the death of Diona."

"I've often wondered that myself. I was so young and lost at the time that I couldn't see past the pain of losing my family and trying to hide and survive. When May was dead and I was able to look at things from a different perspective it seemed there were missing pieces."

"And did you ever find anything?" I ask, leaning forward and clutching my cup tightly.

"No. Nothing. Unfortunately, I fell into a deep depression for a very, very long time. After May died and I assumed her identity, I read through some of her journals. It all seemed like the ramblings of a mad woman so I gave up. Then, I started talking to Wolves who came to the human village for my herbs and tinctures. They were too clouded by hate to be of any real use, only spewing lies and rumors. Eventually, if you tell people lies for long enough they turn them into fact in their own heads. I found that to be what happened but didn't dare to correct them and reveal myself."

“So you’ve found nothing at all?”

“No. Nothing. I kept May’s journals and built the secret archive of our history when I came back to the Crimson Valley in the hope that one day someone would come along who could find something useful within them. That person is you. The knowledge is at your fingertips. You just have to seek it out.”

“And how do you propose I do that?”

She looks down her nose at me and sips her tea slowly. Placing it back down in its saucer, grandma leans back in her chair and crosses her hands over her stomach. A smile spreads across her face, reminding me of the way Bear looks at me when he’s up to something.

“You’ll use your magick, of course.”

“Of course,” I murmur. I only hope it doesn’t turn into lightning or fire and burn the archives and us into ash. “And how do I do that when I can’t control it? And what am I supposed to do exactly?”

“You ask it to show you the answers you seek.”

I look at her incredulously. “Seriously? I ask it? I’m not having a conversation with it.”

“Maybe you should,” she winks over her tea cup before taking another sip.

I sit stunned, staring off into the void in my head. A conversation? That seems too easy. I’m about to put it off for another day when the image of Samira floating in the river between my arms, sick and near death, comes rushing into my head. Magick flowed out of me that day with very little effort, bonded us together, and saved her life. If I can do that, then surely I can have a conversation with it.

Jaw set, I put my tea cup down and push away from the table. Grandma stands and helps me move it off the hidden door in the floor that leads to the archives. Walls now covered with flowering vines overtaking every vertical surface of the dining area, I reach through and find the antique sconce and pull. A soft click sounds and the floor raises slightly to reveal the stairs down.

Three steps down and I inhale deeply the scent of damp earth and parchment. It's dark, my candle barely illuminating the stairs as I carefully take them down deep underground. A chill hits my skin like always, and I pull my sweater tight around my body.

Lighting the candelabra on the table, I stand back and look around the room. Floor to ceiling shelves are filled to capacity with journals and papers, rolled parchment and artifacts. There's no real organization, and my perusing thus far hasn't helped. I've only been through a small amount of the archives, but looking around now I realize it was ignorant of me to think I'd be able to get through all of it to find the answers I needed. It would take me a full four seasons or more to get through everything, and that's not something I have time for. Not with Samira waiting for me while I still search for my answers.

"Ask it to show me the answers," I mumbled to myself. "How the feck do I do that?"

A soft breeze comes from nowhere and flickers the candle flames, teasing the fire like it's going to leave me in darkness. But there's nowhere for a breeze to come from underground, so who or what did that?

Flames dance again under a stronger breeze, two of them going out this time.

"Hey! Stop that!" I yell at no one in particular.

The answer comes in the form of an even stronger breeze that not only blows out all of the remaining candles but sends papers fluttering to the floor.

"Okay, fine. You have my attention. What now?"

But only silence answers me.

"I can't make fire. How am I supposed to see in the pitch black?"

A soft whisper answers me. "Use your magick."

The voice is feminine and close. Much too close. Goosebumps rise all over my body and my defenses go up.

“Who said that?”

“Use your magick, Rose.” It’s not a threatening voice, more soft and tender like someone I should know. I’m instantly put at ease, lulled into a sense of safety.

“I can’t. I don’t know how.”

“Close your eyes. Feel your magick. Tell it what you want and it will obey.”

“O-kay...” Tell my magick? I audibly scoff at the idea. It’s not a person with independent thought. It’s wild and unpredictable, but I don’t have anything to lose so I do as I’ve once again been told.

Eyes closed, I reach inside of myself to the box where I keep my magick locked up and release the latch. Instantly, I feel the golden hues burst forth and rush through my body. Every cell, every fiber, every tiny piece of myself feels like it’s filled with lightning. It feels like I’m gold inside and out. My breath, my saliva, my skin. It all feels golden and light, like the sun and lightning live inside of me and all over me.

With only a thought, I imagine the candles reigniting. Opening my eyes, I’m no longer standing in the dark but once again illuminated by candlelight. Raising my hands up, I inspect them, turning them over repeatedly, as I look for something, for anything. But there aren’t any changes. I still look the same to my own eyes.

Since lighting the candles back was so easy, I ask my magick to show me the way to the answers I seek. Focusing my thoughts on the start of Wolf laws, I ask my magick to guide me to the ‘why’.

Golden light threads out from the center of my forehead, from my mind’s eye, and coasts along books on a shelf. Then, it stops. The stack of papers beneath are love letters to May’s brother, Timber. Sonnets and praises of love and a future together, pleas for him to come visit, warnings of an angry father discovering their secret.

But something stands out. The handwriting varies, making me take note of the signatures. For a while, I sit at the table and separate out the letters from each young woman and, by the end, I count at least six different

lovers. All Wolves. All young and impressionable with stars in their eyes and the idea that they are his true mate.

I tsk aloud to myself and the spirits who haunt the archives. “Oh, Timber. You fiend. How many hearts did you break? In the end, you paid a price for your misgivings. I guess we all did.”

The breeze ruffles the pages gently, almost as if whatever is here agrees with me. So far I know that Timber was beaten nearly to death by the father and brothers of one of his brokenhearted Wolf lovers after romantic intermingling was banned and Reds were no longer welcome in Wolf territory. Shortly after, Diona the Alpha daughter got pregnant by my grandmother’s Elder brother, Delta. Her illness or disease or whatever it was made her waste away halfway through her pregnancy and she died.

At that point, it seemed to be all out war on Reds and a total massacre of anyone with red hair occurred nearly overnight. But it still seems like there must be more.

“What am I missing? What happened between Timber being beaten and Diona dying?”

Golden threads shoot out from all of my fingertips, moving in every direction, braid together in one thick strand, and force their way between books lined up on a shelf. Carefully, I remove the books but the strand remains touching the back of the bookshelf. Forcefully, the breeze becomes a gust and knocks down a few more books from the shelf. And still, my golden magick strand remains touching the back wall of the shelf.

“I wonder...”

Shaky fingers reach out and I gently rap my knuckles against the wood. Feeling foolish because I have no idea what I’m even supposed to be hearing, I pull my hand back. But something nudges me from behind.

“Fine. You don’t have to be pushy,” I respond to it, more annoyed at its touch than I should be. After all, whatever *it* is, it's helping me.

Removing the books from the shelf below, I rap my knuckles on the back wall and compare sounds. There’s most definitely a difference where my magick is touching. It sounds almost hollow. Excitement fills me and I

feel along the seams of the shelf wall searching for something, for anything that will help me reveal the hidden compartment.

I search for a long time and am about to give up when my fingernail catches on an imperfection in the wood. Small, barely noticeable, a tiny divot is scoured into the otherwise unmarred wall. Digging my nail in, I give it a pull, but it doesn't budge. Frustrated, I pull harder and feel a tear start underneath my nail but push on stubbornly. Just as my nail feels like it's going to rip free from my finger, the wood gives and falls open.

Blood drips down my finger onto the floor below. Without another thought, I send a thread of golden magick out from the center of my heart and wrap it around the wound. Tingles spread through it for a brief moment and then the pain is gone. My finger is perfect, like nothing ever happened, and I'm stunned for a moment. I just healed myself with barely a thought.

"I have to tell grandma!" A large smile on my face, I turn to leave but find myself hitting an invisible barrier. Like warm energy pushing me back and reminding me I'm not done, yet.

"Ah. I forgot. My apologies spirit."

Gold illuminates the hidden compartment where a large book lay concealed, wrapped in very old and weathered fabric. Shaky hands carry it to the table where I unwrap the book and carefully fold and place the fabric to the side. Made of leather from a deer and tanned black, the book has impressions of the moons and the mountains on the top of the cover. Underneath is a large tree with roots extending down and forming a Wolf and different flowers.

Wolves and Reds. We once lived in harmony and balanced out each other's existence. The spine cracks as I gently open it, and inside I find writings like nothing I've ever seen. Magick of healing and helping. Information about plants and nature. Stories of the first bonds of Wolf and Red which combined fauna and flora, animal and nature, beast and magick.

Our combined histories are unlike anything I expected. Wolves had magick similar to our own. We shared gifts and helped each other. We broke bread and lived as family units. No Wolf territory or Crimson

Valley. No theirs and ours. We were one. There was no violence, no fear. Only peace.

For hours, I flip through the pages and learn of a lifetime I cannot imagine but so desperately want back for both of our people. The book is full of beauty and creation, and my heart aches to be able to have a fraction of it with my family and my true mate.

Turning pages, I'm nearing the last few pages when the narrative changes. Greed has arrived in the form of humans. They've introduced something Cordova never had.

Envy.

Some of the humans want what we all had. In elaborate plots, they befriended us and sowed tiny threads of envy through lies. First with the Wolves, saying the Reds were keeping secrets from them and not sharing goods. Then, they took to the Reds, saying the Wolves were doing the same. Reds being who they were felt hurt, while some Wolves felt anger.

And that's how the mistrust started. With lies by a few jealous humans who just so happened to find Cordova and decide to stay. Seeds of mistrust grew into more over time, and some Wolves began to pull away from the Reds.

All of the pain and hurt we've endured, the ruination of our harmony, was all because outsiders wanted what we all had and sought to destroy it.

I slam the book closed in frustration and anger.

"And how does this help me now? I need to know what happened between Timber's beating and Diona dying. I need to know why it escalated so quickly. I've met Reika and Rikon. They're very logical and seem kind. Why would they kill off almost an entire community of people?"

My magick reaches out in front of me and flips open one of May's journals I hadn't been able to read, yet. I pick it up with shaky hands, ready to finally have some answers.

Three nights ago I awoke standing alone
in the forest with no memory of how I
got there. My sleeping shift was covered
in dirt and my feet were bare and cut
up. Blood seeped from the bottom of my
feet into the ground and I could feel it
absorbing my life force. I was terrified.

Darkness surrounded me. No sound or
light could penetrate the small circle of
my vision but power pulsed and
hummed deep inside of my chest.

And it scared me. It still scares me.

It was like something seeped into me
and took over the bright light that was
my magick and turned it to shadows and
a black, pulsing threat. I'm the threat
now. Danger envelops me, surrounds me,
races through my veins and whispers in
my head. It tells me to do things that I
know are wrong.

'Poison their deer,' it says. 'Curse their
wombs,' it screams in my sleep. 'Kill the
Alpha!' it yells all day, every day.

This darkness is overtaking my rational
mind. I can't escape it. I feel wrong,
dangerous.

—May

The Elders can't be trusted. They want to put me to death. They say I'm too dangerous to allow to live, but they're too scared to say it outside of their private meetings. What they don't know is I can hear them. Their thoughts, their desires, their fears. Nothing is a secret anymore. I can hear it all inside of my head.

But should I let them live or should I kill them all?

Should I run or return and take over my village?

Decisions, decisions.

-May

Shutting the journal, I sit back and stare into the flame of a candle for a long time, fully realizing what I've been shown. May was starting to go to the darkness and lose her mind. No Red would ever consider killing someone, especially the Elders. Some of those Elders were her parents. She was talking about her blood family and others whom she'd known her entire life like they were a bug to be squashed. That sort of violence is not in the nature of a true Red.

Grandma was right. What they did to her brother sent her over the edge into madness and darkness. Samira has dark magick in her now, and a thought forces itself to the front of my mind, refusing to shake free.

Will Samira turn into something like May?

CHAPTER 30

ROSE

I haven't been able to sleep for days. All I can think about is the darkness that overtook May and all of the what-ifs with Samira. She's my one true mate, of that I'm certain. Could I live my life with someone like May? Could I live with and love pure evil if she turned into that?

There's no answer that will form in my mind, like it's an impossibility but also a possibility that I can't fathom. Torn and twisted up inside, I have no appetite. The rest of May's dark journal may hold some answers, but I'm too frightened to continue to read it.

What if it does nothing but make things worse? What if there's some knowledge in there, some sort of black magick released when I read it? What if it infects me?

Pacing behind my parents' house, I halt in my steps when I hear the distant giggling of Bear. It's early, just after breakfast, and he's supposed to be doing his chores. Empty pig troughs tell me he didn't. Shaking my head, I quickly feed the pigs and then follow the sounds of his laughter down to the river where I find him playing with grandma.

The innocence lighting up his face warms my heart and sets my worries to the side for the moment. Bear is everything I wanted to be able to be but couldn't due to my hair. He's wild and free, coming and going as he

pleases. Though a bit of structure would probably do him some good, he's a good boy. I sit on a log and watch them splash each other, grandma chasing him and picking him up like he weighs nothing.

Even she's able to forget what she is for a brief time, and I find myself slightly envious. My hair is a gift and a curse. Maybe one day nature or the Gods will do me the favor of changing it to brown like they did her. It would be nice to never wear a wig again, to feel the sun on my scalp and not harbor any fear of being found out and executed.

While the Wolves have lifted the laws, no one is naive enough to believe they'll tolerate red hair or the idea of us having magick again. We're not a threat to them if we're more like humans and less like ourselves. It makes me wonder if they know the true history of our peoples. Thinking back on something Reika and Rikon said, I wonder if they know the actual truth but have failed to fully reveal it for fear of starting more violence with the humans this time.

"Humans," I sigh loudly. My father is a human, the most kind and caring one I know. I refuse to blame him for the terrible atrocities those like him committed so many lifetimes before he existed. While we all live in harmony and intermingle now, there are those humans who don't trust Reds or Wolves and choose to stay in their own village.

And, to be honest, I can't blame them. Humans live much shorter lives than any of us, and while they may not know the major part their ancestors played in the demise of Cordova, suspicion remains in their hearts. It's probably better those humans live apart until we're able to heal ourselves.

But my father, my own blood, is human. He's proof that there's always good to be seen and had. He's an innocent and we must always protect them. His goodness is evident in Bear, who is now running up the hill towards me, screaming like a banshee.

"Save me from her! She's gone mad!" he peels with laughter.

Grandma is hot on his heels, forgetting to hide her Wolf speed for a moment and moving very much unlike any Red can. She catches him just as he reaches me and wraps his soaked body around me.

“Bear! You’re freezing cold and wet! Get off, you little miscreant!” A chuckle escapes me for the first time since I’d read that dark journal, and it feels good to let the heaviness of it free.

He’s snatched from me and howls with laughter as she lifts him above her head and spins him around before placing him next to her on the log.

“Grandma, how big your muscles are!” I exclaim teasingly, giving her a wink.

“The better to play with my grandson, my dear.” She looks at least twenty years younger, like she was never sick and instead is reversing in age.

Is that a thing? Can she reverse age? Can I?

Clearing her throat, she smirks and I remember she can read my thoughts at times. Leaning in towards me, she whispers, “It is. I can. Don’t know if you can, yet, deary.”

“Interesting,” I mumble.

“Indeed,” she agrees, then claps her hands and returns her attention to Bear. “Who wants cookies?”

“Ooh, me, me, me!” He’s practically hovering, he’s bouncing so animatedly next to me.

“Come along then, Bear. Grandma has more cookies than I know what to do with. Sounds like you’re the right young man to help me with that problem.”

They hold hands and start to walk off together before grandma calls back over her shoulder. “Come along, Rose!”

“Yes, grandma,” I smile and follow them to her hut silently, reveling in the simplicity of a grandmother baking cookies for her grandchildren. It’s something I once took for granted but now see the beauty in.

Her hut is overgrown with vines in the few short days since I last visited the archives. Inside the kitchen and dining area, every surface is covered in plates of cookies and baked goods. My eyes scan over herbs and plants

scattered here and there, and I wonder if her treats don't serve a larger purpose.

"Who's all this for, grandma?"

Her eyes pin me down to my chair in an answering twinkle. "For our renewed allies, of course."

"Uh huh..." I'm definitely suspicious and decide to call her out on it. "And what did you put in them?"

"Just a few things to enhance the love, my dear. I thought there was too much hate and mistrust, so I might as well help our newfound relationship along."

My teeth sink into a cookie and euphoria overtakes my mood. "And what did you put into this one, grandma?"

"Oh that? A little lavender, cinnamon, powdered rose petals, and something special. That one is only for mature Wolves." She winks conspiratorially. "And I should have warned you before you ate it, but the need to see your friend is going to overpower your rational mind very soon."

"I came here to talk to you, and you tricked me with treats. Did you do that on purpose?" My grin feels strange, almost like I've been drugged, but I can't seem to find the annoyance at her derailing my plans for when I came to see her.

"You've been very stressed, my dear. A young woman such as yourself needs to relax until she can learn some control."

"Yeah! Relax, Rose!" Bear chimes in from the other seat at the dining table where he's happily munching on two large cookies.

"Uh, should he be eating those?"

"Those are the kid cookies. Don't you worry. Grandma has Bear under control. He's going to be my special helper for the day, aren't you, dear?"

"Yep! We're going on a special delivery. I get to meet Wolf kids!" Those big eyes light up with excitement. Since our family sat down to discuss the

laws being lifted, having a Wolf friend is the only thing he's talked about.

Grandma reaches over and hands me a beautiful floral patterned bundle tied with a red ribbon. "Here. These are for you and your friend to enjoy. Now, run along and call out to her. It's still blooming season, and the orchard seems like a nice place to enjoy the afternoon. All of those fragrant petals," she sighs, her eyes off in the distance of her memories. "Bring me back some blossoms, deary."

She shoos me from her home urgently, and the feeling of needing Samira builds inside of me to a loud thrum.

Just as she shuts the door, I hear Bear blurt out, "Rose has a friend?" A chuckle answers him.

Silently, I walk towards the orchard, bundle of treats clutched to my chest tightly. Opening the box I lock my magick down in, it flows freely from me. Though it's not visible, I can feel it waving back and forth with the wind. Feeling free and euphoric, I flex it and roll it and expand it around me. Petals move back at the invisible force when I push my magick out from me. I'm much more in control of it than I was just a few weeks ago. It feels more like an extension of my own body rather than some wild thing inside of myself that I have to exert control over.

It feels like me.

The tops of apple trees come into view as I walk up the slight hill in the path. Reaching down our bond, I easily find Samira's dark wall and caress it but get no response. Determined to see her, I send a small spark of electricity down and give her a tiny zap. I can feel her reaction, but still she keeps her wall up. With as much power as I think is safe, I smother her wall and give her another jolt. In response, she hits me back and I wince.

"Ow! Playing hard to get, then? Guess I'll come to you, my beast."

I can feel her through the ground and in the air off in the forest. Though I can't tell what she's doing, I know she's not alone. It might be a stupid move, but my euphoric state doesn't allow me to feel fear. The only thing I can feel is happiness and my need for Samira.

A little while later, I've made my way silently through the forest and stare down at her doing combat training with the Guard. My hiding spot is good, maybe not good enough to hide from Wolf eyes, but it works for now. Not planning on leaving the Crimson Valley, I forgot my red cape so my earthy green and brown shift easily blend in with the surroundings.

Below, Samira and Auri circle each other in a ring. Fast and agile, Auri dodges most of Samira's strikes but occasionally one lands and sends her flying. While strong and fierce, Auri isn't my Samira. Powerful and focused, arm and shoulder muscles defined and bulging from under her tank top, Samira looks like she could take down the entire Guard. And yet, Auri is the one she's sparring with instead.

"Again!" The small woman yells from her place on the ground. With a flip, she's up on her feet and brushing off the dirt once again.

"Enough already!" One of the males taunts. "You're never going to win against her, Auri."

"It's not about winning," she growls. "It's about learning and surviving."

"What's there to survive now that the Reds are safe and the laws are lifted?" A young male Wolf closest to Auri's side of the ring speaks up with all of the ignorance of youth.

"The Reds aren't the real threat," she answers under her breath.

Interesting. I'd like to talk to her more about that but for now...

My eyes snap back to my love to find her eyes closed, nose in the air. A devilish smile spreads across her face, and I know she's scented me.

"I'm done for the day." Samira blurts out and turns to stride off further into the forest in the direction of my village.

"Where are you going?" Auri whines behind her. "We still have hours of daylight."

"Tired. See you tonight for dinner."

Auri goes still and then snaps her eyes to my hiding spot, a wry smile on her face. "Have fuuunnn!" she sings to Samira's back.

Quietly, I retreat from my hiding spot and walk back towards the orchard. Reaching out, I find Samira has opened her wall and lets me inside. When my golden magick makes contact with her darkness, a feeling washes over me that halts me in my steps. It's like taking the first breath of air after being deprived of breathing. It's like tasting the sweetest strawberry and the juices filling your mouth. It's like chills and fire filling your body all at the same time.

"My little Red. What are you doing so far from home?" she speaks to me down our bond with a sultry voice that makes my knees go weak.

Taking a deep breath, I find my feet and ground myself to the soil, taking measured steps towards the orchard.

"Hello, my love. I figured since you wouldn't open your barrier to talk to me today, then I would just have to come to you."

"And you've found me, so what now?" Her voice comes from behind me, warm breath tickling my ear as she wraps her arms around my waist.

Turning in her arms, I look up into her gold eyes and smirk. "Now, I take my time with you." Stretching up on my toes, I brush my lips softly over hers. Smooth silk and warmth, perfection and bliss hit me, and then her lips part and our tongues touch. And I'm lost in her, lost in us, pulled tightly and crushed to her body.

When our kiss finally breaks, she pulls back and inspects every part of my face like she's memorizing it. She looks tired, less stressed but tired.

"Miss me?" I tease.

"Always, my sweet Red. Always." Resting her forehead against mine, she closes her eyes and inhales deeply.

"I missed you, too. I'm sorry I've shut you out, but you have to trust I have my reasons."

"I do trust you."

"Good." Pulling back, I work myself free from her arms and grab her hand. "Now, come along. I have treats and we're going to spend the rest of

the day together.”

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere beautiful.”

A short time later, we step hand in hand into the orchard. The warm blooming season air whispers through the trees sending petals cascading down around us like snow. It’s quiet. Just the sound of the wind and our breathing, but I can hear her thoughts like she’s speaking out loud.

“I know the laws are lifted, but I don’t fully trust that we can be together in public, yet.”

“Me, either,” I answer aloud. “That’s why I’ve been keeping my distance and shutting you out. I’ve been searching for answers to my questions. The truth and the way forward lie in the past.”

Samira reaches out and plucks a falling petal from the air with a movement too quick for my eyesight to register. “Tell me what you mean by that,” her voice is low and husky, full of emotion and lust.

Instantly, my thighs clench and my core tingles with desire. Walking towards the trees closest to the river, I spot a secluded area and pull her down to sit next to me behind a tree. Water rushes by in front of us, the visual and sound soothing me and helping to calm the effects of the herbal cookies grandma gave me.

Placing the bundle of treats I brought along on my lap, I unwrap the fabric to reveal what I hope will be the beginning of a night to remember.

“These have herbs in them that produce interesting effects. Don’t eat more than one. Trust me,” I giggle. Samira grabs the biggest cookie and then passes one to me. I munch slowly as I talk. “You see, I always felt like there had to be more to our peoples’ histories than Diona’s death and the Elder son’s execution. So, I’ve been spending my time reading and searching through our archives for answers. I think whatever hidden things happened in the past are going to repeat themselves unless they are discovered and stopped. This brief reprieve from oppression is just that. Brief. Of course, I could be wrong, but I don’t think I am.”

“I’ve always felt the same way, but I never had the courage to ask the Alphas. Maybe I should.”

Samira is quiet for a while as she eats alongside me and we listen to the water singing. Treat devoured, I’m feeling a bit lighter and carefree and reach down to grab another one only to realize there’s only one left.

“Samira! Did you eat all of those cookies?”

Hooded eyes meet mine and an almost drunk grin is pasted on her face. “Guess so. I didn’t notice. Just kept eating. They are soooo good!” Her deep laughter bounces off the trees, and that’s the moment my own cookie decides to take effect.

Toppling over, I clutch my stomach as laughter racks my body. “You—should—see your-f-face! Sooo cuuuttteeee!!!” I cackle loudly, surely terrifying the nearby birds.

“Cute? Me?” She asks as if she’s insulted.

Quashing my fit and hoping I haven’t hurt her feelings, I sit up with my lips pressed tightly together to keep any more laughter from escaping. And then I see her crouched down on all fours. Eyes watching me like I’m her prey rather than her mate, black hair cascading down around her beautiful face. A murderously sexy smile says I’m about to be in a lot of trouble. Good trouble.

With no warning, she lunges forward and lands on top of me, pinning me to the ground. Fingers twirl hair of the wig I’m wearing around them. She pulls the strands to her nose and inhales deeply.

“Oh, little Red, how I’ve missed you.” Strong hands grab the top of my dress and rip it straight down the middle, my breasts now fully exposed to the warm breeze. “And how I’ve missed these.” Her warm hot mouth clamps down on my nipple punishingly. Sucking hard, her tongue creates a dangerous friction on my needy peak causing me to release a quick burst of power into her mouth.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Samira sits up abruptly and looks down at me with a surprised but amused expression. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Did I hurt you? I didn’t mean to do that.”

“It hurt a little, but I liked it,” she growls. “Let’s see where else on your body we can get your power to shoot from.”

With no warning, she clamps her mouth down on my other breast and urgent fingers dive up my skirt, skating along my thighs until she finds my hips. Soft touches caress my hip bone, and I feel desire and energy building inside of me to an almost painful level. But her hand doesn’t move and continues the luscious torturing movements that are driving me to desperation.

“Please,” I beg through breathy pants, my body squirming beneath the weight of her pressing down on me.

“Please what, my love?” she asks teasingly in a lusty voice that only adds to my need.

“Please touch me,” I plead.

“And where would you like me to touch you, little Red?”

“My cunt. Touch my cunt. Please! I need to feel you.” Power tingles through me and into her mouth on my breast. The sensation forces a soft moan of muffled pleasure from deep in her throat.

Aggressively, she grabs the side of my panties and rips them off my body. Tossing the fabric to the side, her hot palm cups my pussy, fingers teasing the outside of my crease while I writhe beneath her.

“Samira, please!” I’m on the verge of tears with painful desire, and with my final plea she gives in and sinks a long digit deep inside of me.

With no warning, power pulses from deep inside of me into her through that powerful finger as she caresses my internal walls and rubs her palm in a delicious friction against my clit.

“More,” I beg. “I need more.”

Another finger slips inside and the fullness makes me tighten around her.

“Ah, pretty girl. That feel good? Do you like how I make your pretty pussy cry for me?” Teeth sink into my nipple at the same time that her knee comes up between my thighs and drives her fingers deeper inside.

I scream out a jumble of unintelligible words as the power pulses from my body. Her response is feral, like an animal. Straddling my other leg, she grinds her own pussy down on my thigh and fucks her knee up into my core, pushing her fingers deeper than I’ve ever felt. Samira hits a place inside of me I never knew existed, and I’m thrown over the edge of euphoria, writhing beneath her, screaming her name, begging for more, begging her not to stop. Words of love and lust and how much I love how she fucks me pour from my mouth.

“Baby,” she murmurs huskily around my nipple. “Baby, your power is making me feel things...it’s making me lose control. I need you. I need so much more of you. I need your pretty pussy to come around my fingers.”

Her words are all it takes to send me over that final cliff and I’m falling, falling so fast and so far into a vortex of screaming, pulsing, panting ecstasy. Power erupts from my body as my eyes clench shut and golden fireworks erupt behind my lids. Samira’s dark power reaches out and tightens around my body, around the magick inside of me, and holds me to my body before I explode and float away to whatever is the next plane of existence.

Coming down, she releases me slowly as I regain my breath and a modicum of composure. But then I open my eyes and see her looking down on me with what I can only describe as a deadly lust that calls to me at my innermost core. Power fills my body and gives me a strength I’ve never had before, and I roll us over in the grass.

Now on top of her and sitting between her thighs, I look down on her shocked face and smile demurely.

“My turn, baby,” I whisper. Strength still coursing through me, I pull off her shoes and then rip her pants down her legs in one swift motion, tossing them to the side. I pause in shock, staring down at her naked cunt. “No panties? Were you expecting me, then?”

“I never wear them,” she smirks back.

“Noted,” I chuckle and dive down face first between her thighs. Sliding my hands under her hips, I pull her body to my face and inhale deeply. “Gods, I’ve missed your perfect pussy.”

“Then give her a kiss and tell her how much,” she taunts back.

Burying my face between her lips, I plunge my tongue inside of her mercilessly. Over and over, I fuck her with my tongue and rub my nose against her needy clit. Magick pulses in my veins begging for release, so I send it down the length of my tongue and probe it deep inside of her, farther than my body can reach.

Her back arches and she digs her heels into the ground, lifting her ass and giving me a deeper angle. Spreading her with one hand, I move my mouth up and latch onto her clit. My other hand caresses up her ass, finding her dripping wet and then I plunge three fingers deep inside of her, sending my magick flowing through her with them.

“Goooodssss,” she moans out in a choppy, pained voice. “You’re touching places I’ve never—”

“I know. I feel so deep inside of you like this. I feel your need, your emotions, your pleasure through my power as if it’s my own.” I pepper her clit with little sucks and kisses while I turn my fingers and caress the top wall inside of her. Her legs shake as she tries to hold herself up so I can get that perfect angle. “There, baby? Do you like it there?”

“Oh, fuuucckkk,” she hisses between clenched teeth. “Yes, there.”

“Do you want more?” I tease, slowing my motions.

“Yes! Give me more, Rose.”

“Say please.” I can’t keep from smiling as I flick my tongue against her swollen clit.

“No!” she growls back. With no warning, her dark power reaches out, wraps around my head, and pulls me tightly into her body.

I latch my lips and teeth and tongue around her clit and fuck her fast and hard with my fingers. Grinding into my face, her magick holding me so tight against her that I can barely breathe, she moans and screams my name all the while her wetness seeps out of her body and drips to the ground.

“Right. Fucking. There!” She grunts out and then shudders violently around me. Her pussy clenches down on my fingers as her release drenches my hand, my face, and pours from her body. Thighs quaking, dark power vibrating around my head, I fuck her until every single drop is milked from her, until every single moment of Samira’s pleasure belongs to me.

After what feels like a never ending orgasm, she starts to come down and her thighs and magick release their hold on me. Softly, I kiss her abused clit and pull my fingers from her body. Legs giving out, she collapses fully onto the ground, exhausted and spent.

I take the opportunity to climb up her body and wrap myself around her. We stay wrapped in each other like that for a while, breathing in our combined scents, feeling the after effects of our magick and power lingering in the air. When the sounds of the river and birds return, we both burst out into laughter.

“Well, if staying away from you results in this kind of welcome then I might be willing to go longer before seeing you next time.” She shakes with laughter beneath me.

Feigning shock, I sit up and press a hand to my chest. “You want to go longer without seeing me? I’m hurt!” But I can’t hold the act long and join her in laughter.

It feels natural, free, to lay in nature with my lover, my mate, and laugh and talk like this. But before long, I know we’ll both have to come back down to reality and hide our love for Gods know how long.

The pain of not seeing her again for an extended time only fuels my need to find answers and find them quickly.

CHAPTER 31

SAMIRA

The pain I feel having no choice but to leave Rose without knowing when I'll see her again sends chaotic jolts of dark energy fissuring through my heart. My fingers trace her collarbone, back and forth, back and forth, as I look down at her asleep on my lap. Memorizing her freckles like the stars and committing every contour of her face to memory, I unwillingly wake her from her peaceful slumber.

Satiated and lazy, her smile and sleepy eyes greets me. "I could wake to your face every day for the rest of our lives."

A deep hum of satisfaction reverberates through my chest at her words, at words I feel within myself when I look at her. "One lifetime isn't enough. I want you for all of them."

Bending down, I press my lips to hers softly, painfully, heartbreaking in its pureness. "Rose, I've never loved anyone in my life a fraction of the way I love you. And now, I have to leave you and don't know when I'll see you again."

Tears fill her eyes and spill over when she sits up. Small hands cradle my face and determined eyes stare into mine. "We need to find answers. We need to know the build up to the anti-Red hate. It feels like an agenda. As soon as I have answers, we can decide together what our next move will

be. Until then, I don't trust they won't change their minds and punish those of us who trusted them again."

Nodding, I agree silently. It's hard to think of my own blood as people who've committed genocide without good reason. But the more I think about it, is there any good reason? The answer is no. The answer will always be no, and for that reason I will protect Rose and her people. I will protect our secret love until I know the threat to the Reds is gone for good.

"I'll talk to my grandparents. They made the laws, so they'll give me the answers we need. Until then, keep my heart inside of your chest safe."

A single tear falls down my face before I realize it escaped. I was trying so hard to stay strong for Rose, but as I reach out and crush her to my body, understanding hits me. I don't need to be strong for her. With her I can be anything and everything. I can cry, laugh, be furious, be passionate, be dominant or submissive. I can be free to be my true self, darkness and all, and not be afraid of her running. Together we are at our most powerful.

And I will do anything and be anything to keep her. She's mine!

We hold each other for a long time, but the sun starts to set and our time has come to an end.

"Rose, my sweet Rose, I have to go. If I'm not at dinner with Auri tonight she'll give me hell, and I'll never hear the end of it.

"I know," she murmurs into my neck. "I have to go, too. Supper with my family."

We pull apart and crush our lips together violently before separating again, both of us gasping to catch our breath. Standing, I hug her tightly.

"I love you," I whisper into her hair.

"And I love you," she whispers back.

Then we release each other and turn towards our homes, walking away without looking back.

Once I hit the forest, I quickly shift into my Wolf and run as fast as my legs will allow. The muscle exertion distracts briefly from the pain in my

heart, but as I get closer to my village raucous sounds catch my attention and make me slow my pace.

The sun has started to set and the forest casts a shadow over the village, but my Wolf eyes allow me to see everything much too clearly. My jaw gapes open as I survey the widespread hedonism. Bodies of flesh and fur are in various stages of sucking or fucking in the open, up against buildings and trees, some rolling around on the ground.

Elder Wolves in various states of undress or in their fur are mixed in the scene as if they were young Wolves again. Just when I think I've seen it all, my grandparents run by me in their Wolf forms, Rikon chasing Reika and nipping at her back haunches like a damn teenage boy.

"What in the actual fuck?!" I grumble in my Wolf thoughts to no one in particular.

"This is crazy, right?" Auri answers, yellow fur prancing up next to me.

"What happened? Have they all gone mad?"

"Iris, your Red's grandmother, and a young boy delivered a cart full of baked treats. She warned us they were only for adults and would produce side effects, but we're Wolves. We don't listen to instructions very well. I tuned her out the moment I smelled them, and well..." Her nose juts out to indicate the madness before us.

It's then that I take notice of who is missing from the village. "Where are all of the children? They didn't get any of these did they?"

"Nope. She brought a separate batch for them. The parents took them home and have kept them inside this entire time. A few of the teenagers are babysitting now that the younger ones are in bed. It's handled. The babes are all safe and tucked away."

I exhale a breath of relief, not able to take my eyes off the widespread activities.

"And where did you run off to, Sammie? You smell like sex and cookies and something else. Apples?"

Deflecting, I turn and run off towards my cabin. “I’m starving. Are you coming or looking for Alaric?”

Light feet follow after me at a quick pace. “What’s for dinner?”



Shoving another hunk of meat into my mouth, I’m determined to get through dinner without answering any of Auri’s interrogation questions. Instead, I decide to ask my own.

“Tell me about your adoptive mother.”

She drops her fork with a loud clank. “And now you’ve ruined my good mood. Thanks for that.”

“Anytime, little sister. Tell me about her. I’m genuinely curious how you came from a woman like that.”

“I really don’t know. I always felt like I didn’t belong with her or the humans, like I was something else, something more. Wolves came into the human village every now and then, but she hid me away like I was a dirty secret. I never even talked to another Wolf until she sold me to Fenris.”

“Why do you think she did that? Sold you, I mean.”

“Greed or desperation, maybe. She was coming to the end of her life, or at least that’s what she told me, and I was nothing more than a complication. If I was gone she would have the remainder of her time to do what she wanted without me there to bother her.”

“How much did he give her for you?”

“I’m not sure. Some jewelry and other trade goods. Trunks were delivered in the back of a cart. Three strong, giant men took the trunks inside our small hut and then turned on me before I had a chance to run. I never suspected her. The last thing I remember seeing before they threw a hood over my head was her smiling and waving goodbye to me.”

A shiver runs up my spine. What kind of mother could do that to their child, blood or not?

“I’m sorry for what she did to you, Auri. Whoever your real mother was had to be special or Damon wouldn’t have died shortly after her.”

“I’m sure she was.” Auri’s eyes become distant, looking off into the fireplace, her plate forgotten. “You know, sometimes I see her in my dreams. Not all of her, just her red hair. I don’t know if I’ll ever find out who she was, and I’m okay with that. My gift will always allow her to live on, even if no one remembers her, and I’m grateful for it.”

My heart hurts because of our shared parentage, and I tell her what I haven’t told anyone other than Rose. “You know, I didn’t know my mother either. No one knows who she was other than a human. They suspect Damon had a brief interaction with her, and she hid her pregnancy from him. I was abandoned as a baby and found by some Reds who turned me over to the Alphas when I started to show signs of the Wolf. I know how it feels not to know where you come from, but I take solace that I know who I am now. I know where I am, what I stand for, and who I want to be in the future, and that’s more than I could’ve hoped for as a halfling.”

“I’ve seen you with my gift. A lot if I’m being honest. Maybe too much because the flashes of you and your girl together are not the way I want to see my own sister.” Her cheeks turn red with embarrassment. “But, the one constant with you in my visions is power. You’re going to do something great with your own gifts, Sammie.”

I snap my eyes to her, narrowing them in suspicion. “And what have you seen of my gifts, little sister?” My tone is a menacing warning for her to tread lightly.

She isn’t phased and rolls her eyes. “Pu-lease! No need to get defensive. I know a lot of things I shouldn’t, but you, dear sister, are an almost nightly occurrence in my dreams lately. I don’t know if that means whatever is coming is getting closer or something is going to happen, but I know your darkness will be there. The cause of the battle is hazy, like a thick fog that I can’t catch a glimpse of light through.”

I ask her the question that is burning inside of me, afraid of the answer but needing to hear it. “And what do you see of the outcome? Is Rose there?”

Sadness crosses her face so quickly I think I’ve imagined it. Neutralizing her features, she tells me the full truth of what she knows. “Sammie, there are two endings that keep coming back. In one, you are standing on a pile of bodies with a black smoke-like energy surrounding you. In the other, you are standing in a beam of golden sunlight with your darkness coiling around your hands and feet like snakes. Rose is never there.”

My heart sinks. If there is no Rose, there is no future I’m willing to exist in.



Daciana is driving me to the brink of insanity! It’s been a few weeks since the Alphas declared the laws against the Reds obsolete, and she’s been pouting about like an insolent child. No, that’s not fair of me to say. More like she’s been extra cranky.

This morning I attempted to bring her out of her sour mood by inviting her to spar and ended up on my back more times than I can remember in the past. Every move I plan, she counters easily, like she’s reading my mind again.

“You’re not this weak, Samira. Stop letting me beat you!” she growls.

But I’m not letting her. It’s like whatever turmoil is building inside of her is fueling her beast and the anger only serves to make her stronger. The only mother figure I’ve ever known has never been weak or soft. She’s always been a warrior, but something in me wants to set whatever is plaguing her free and help her find some semblance of happiness.

“Aunt Daciana, you are the second strongest female in the pack. Only the Alpha can best you in the sparring ring. Show me some mercy and perhaps some skills so I can be just like you when I grow up one day.” I wink at her

only to annoy her because we have an audience, and she's not willing to show any sort of weakness outside of the blood family.

A knowing smirk crosses her face when she recognizes my blatant flattery for what it is. "Young Wolf, you haven't seen anything, yet."

For hours, we spar. She teaches me hand-to-hand combat maneuvers that work every fiber in my muscles to exhaustion. Finally, when it's over, I collapse in a heap on the hill overlooking the sparring ring with her casually lounging next to me.

"Why are you not exhausted? We've been going for hours," I pant out.

"I've lived a much longer life than you, Sammie. Experience will make your body transform into something more than you could ever imagine. I am who I am because of it all." But she doesn't look proud, more melancholy.

It's then that I realize what she means. Grief and loss have made her into this fighting and killing machine, something I have no inkling about and hope to never know.

"Do you miss him?" I ask wistfully.

"Every second that I breathe." Her voice cracks a little, giving away the strength she tries to portray and showing the true bits of her underneath.

Raw moments like these are the ones I cherish the most with the woman who raised me. It's not the rare hugs and kisses. Not the praise or the way her eyes shine when I do something to make her proud. It's the times when she drops the facade and allows me to see the real person underneath it all. The times when I can see she's real, flawed and weak but strong through it all.

We sit in amiable silence for a long time, until the Guard's session has ended and we are truly alone. It's then that I dare ask her what I've been afraid of hearing the answer to.

"Daciana, I have a question, but I'm afraid the answer will change our relationship."

“Nothing will ever change how I feel about you, young one. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, besides *him*.” Even now, she can’t and won’t speak the name of her long gone mate.

“Promise?” I whisper.

“Promise.” Her voice is powerful, serious, and gives away no deception, so I dare to ask what’s been on my mind since I met Rose.

“Did you know the Reds weren’t dangerous when you were killing them and eating their hearts?”

She sucks in a breath so quietly I think I’ve imagined it until she clears her throat to speak.

“No. At first I believed they were as dangerous as the Alphas did. I believed my parents with my whole damn heart.”

“What changed that for you?”

“The more of them I battled with their feeble magic that barely affected us, the more blood I shed, the more I took life and watched it fade from their eyes, the more hearts I ate—” she inhales deeply and stops for a long time before continuing. “---well, it all seemed too easy for people who were supposed to be dangerous to us. The fires burned through their bodies so easily, but something felt wrong. It was like a piece of us was burning along with them.”

“Do you hate them still?”

“No. I hate myself for not stopping it sooner. There were a lot of things that transpired before the Burning Times. A lot of things not written about or talked about to this day, but the Alphas know and I’m old enough to know.”

“Like what?”

“Little things like animals we relied on for a food supply contracting illness and dying off. Jealousy among the pack against the Reds and their powers. Mutterings when a Red would come into the village, even though we relied upon them and allowed them among us. There was always an

undercurrent of animosity. Diona and I were the oldest of the Alphas' children before they became Alphas. Our slower aging and longer life spans allowed us to see things most of the other pack members weren't alive for. Perspective and time do strange things to an old mind, Sammie."

"Do you miss her?"

"Every day, a piece of myself is missing. Grief and loss can do strange things to your mind and spirit."

I think about that for a moment before asking my next question. "What's it done to yours?"

"Made me vengeful and lonely. Even among all of you, I feel their loss in my marrow. It's something I never wish for you to feel. Something I'll do anything and everything to keep from your life."

"And if you can't?"

"Then we'll walk this ground together, burning in our darkness."

"Do you know about her?" I think of Rose's face, not willing to say her name out loud and testing a theory I have about Daciana having magickal powers of her own. Picturing her emerald eyes, light brown skin, and freckles, I don't dare think about her red hair for fear of setting off my aunt's primal instincts. Revelations or not, Rose will never be a casualty of the Wolves if I can help it.

Daciana turns her head to me, eyes filled with sadness. "I do. Rose is special, more so than any Red I've seen in my lifetime."

"Even the Elders?"

"Even them. Guard her, for she's a treasure that cannot be replaced in any lifetime. Something tells me she's the answer."

Staring at the canopy overhead, I think about her words for a long time. Rose is the answer? "Then what's the question?" I ask, scared to find out.

"The question is something you'll have to discover for yourself, Sammie. Until then, protect your girl with everything you are. Even the darkness."

CHAPTER 32

ROSE

A few days ago, I was selling my herbs in the human village in my new banished role as a normal human and overheard something I wish I hadn't. Young Wolves of the Guard perused my wares and flirted with me, no idea of what I really am, and in their arrogance they bragged about beating one of the Elder Red's sons to a bloody mess.

"Fool won't quit sneaking into pack territory so we taught him a lesson" one laughed a horrid sneer of accomplishment on his face.

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Not this time but next time we will. I'll flay his skin from his muscle and eat his fucking Red heart if I see him again. Something tells me that won't be a problem, though. Beat him mindless from what I hear. Timber will live his life more as a log now."

The young Wolf looked proud of what he did, laughing at having destroyed my brother.

At the mention of my brother's name, rage overtook me and I did something I know will have long lasting repercussions.

"You there! Girl! Take this list and fill it. We're in a bit of a hurry."

Containing my fury, I took his list and read over it. They had normal ailments from nausea to women's pains, excessive monthly bleeding, fevers, and some wound care needs. And that's when I got an idea that I acted on without a single care for who I hurt with my next actions.

Wolves have a weakness or rather a lack of education when it comes to herbs and healing. They've never bothered to learn always relying on Red servitude instead. So, I took advantage of that.

Carefully, I measured out toxic and potential deadly mixtures of herbs and plants that looked and smelled similar enough to what they needed. I packaged them in the normal jars and sachets with the usual instructions, sending them on their way with a smile.

And even now, hearing that some Wolves are sick, including the Alphas' pregnant daughter, I can't find an ounce of care in my body.

They deserve every second of pain they get for the way they treat Reds and keep us under their paws.

The actions of one Wolf pushed me
towards darkness and got me banished
for defending myself with my magick.
And now, I'm fully embracing the dark
and issuing back some much earned
justice.

I hope they suffer. I hope they wither
away. And I hope they all die, so I can
return to my village and family, no
longer afraid of the beasts' wrath.

-May

I can't believe what I've just read. May poisoned the Wolves? May was the cause of Diona getting sick? I have to tell someone. Bursting up from the hidden archives, I search around grandma's hut for her, but it's empty. Quickly, I close the door and pull the dining table back over it, and then I run.

I run through the village with nowhere in particular in mind. Following my instincts, I run until I find myself staring at my own hut. Maybe grandma's visiting my parents or Bear. Pushing open the door, I find it empty.

That's strange. Father rarely leaves.

I can't remember the last time my family home didn't have anyone in it, and it feels wrong not to have life teeming inside. Reaching out my magick, I feel a familiar spirit in the air.

"Oh, it's you again. I didn't think you left the archives, whatever or whoever you are. I'm in a hurry. No games this time. Show me what you're here for."

The privacy curtain flutters that surrounds mother and father's bed, so I walk over to it and pull it aside. Nothing is out of the ordinary. Just their bed and the side table that's always been there. Reaching out my magick, I close my eyes and ask it to show me whatever is hidden that I'm supposed to see. I feel it moving through me and then pushing from my body in a thin thread. Opening my eyes, I follow it beneath the bed where it disappears in a large gap beneath two floorboards.

Nerves prickle at my spine. I know I asked my magick to show me what I'm supposed to see, but it still feels like a deep invasion of my parents' privacy. The invisible spirit pushes a breeze against my back in an urge for me to move. With shaky fingers, I test the floorboards, and then I find one of them loose. Once removed, I reach down inside, silently begging the Gods for no monsters or spiders to be hiding inside and stop when I hit something wooden. Tentative fingers trace around it.

A box.

With a deep breath to give myself some courage, I pull the box from its hiding spot and place it on the floor in front of me. I don't know how long

I stare at it, warring internally on whether or not I should open it, all the while the pesky spirit is pushing at my back and an aggressive breeze is whipping my hair around my face.

“Will you stop! I’m going to open it. I need a moment.”

The spirit or whatever it is stops instantly, leaving me in silence with my loudly beating heart the only sound in my home.

“It’s now or never.” And then I open it.

Inside I find baby items. A rattle, a blanket, a bonnet. Taking them out, I hold them gently in my hands and bring my nose down to smell each item. Warmth radiates through my heart. I haven’t found some hidden secret box. I’ve found my parents’ memory box from their babies. Guilt hits me the more I look through the box because for a moment I allowed the pushy spirit creature to make me question my own parents.

I pull out a small etching of them as a young couple holding a baby and smile at their happily twinkling eyes the artist has captured. Remorseful for my actions, I put down the etching and reach for another object to return to the box and something hits me.

The baby has dark hair. Fern is and has always been blonde. I’ve always been hidden away with my bright red hair, and when I got old enough they covered me with a brown wig.

“When was this drawn?” I ask no one in particular. Flipping over the drawing, I look for a date, and then I see it. Two years before we were born. Whose baby is this, and why is this drawing in my parents’ baby memory box?

As if I conjured her from my thoughts, I hear a soft throat clearing behind me. “I see you’ve found it, then.”

Turning around quickly, drawing in hand, I’m about to let my mother have it, but then I see her face and freeze. The pain and remorse layered with some other emotion I can’t place has my heart squeezing in my chest. Mother has always felt like warmth and the sun to me, like someone to cherish and protect, so seeing her this way sends a jolt through me that has my magick tingling.

“Rose, it’s time we talked. Come sit. Bring the box.”

I do as she asks, quickly placing the contents back in the box but leaving the drawing on top. Sitting with her at the dining table, placing the worn box between us, I look at her for the first time in a long time. Really look at her. And I see a tired woman. She’s never looked so tired in my life, or maybe it’s that I haven’t taken the time to notice.

Dry, cracked hands reach out and take each item from the box, putting the drawing to the side for later. She inspects everything with a wistful smile on her face, telling me of who it belonged to. When she gets to the bottom, she pulls out a lock of black hair tied with a dark green ribbon and sighs loudly.

“I didn’t want you to find out this way. Actually, I’d hoped it would never need to be spoken about, but here you are with your insatiable curiosity. I don’t know how you found this box, but I guess that doesn’t really matter now. Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you the entire truth.”

I blurt out the question I’ve been holding in. “Did you and father have a child before Fern and I were born?”

“Your father and I had a difficult journey to becoming parents, Rose. For so long we tried to get pregnant, but it never seemed to take. So, no, we did not have a child before the two of you were born.”

I let out a deep sigh of relief. “For a moment, I thought you were going to say you lost a child.”

“We did lose a child, Rose, but not in the way you think. I’ve always told you the land and nature provide what we need. I’ve tried to instill in you to be kind and forgiving because that was a lesson you would need later in life when you could see this life for what it truly is. Adversity and a gift. You see, we couldn’t make a child of our own, but nature or magick or maybe even the Gods saw to give us one anyway.”

“Explain that in detail, please.”

“One day, two years before you were born, your father and I were walking by the river. Not for any reason, only to enjoy each other's company and feel the land beneath us. While your father is human and I have no magick

other than my knowledge, I've always found it soothing to feel the dirt beneath my feet. So that's what we were doing. We were content but felt something was missing from our lives for a long time. That day someone heard us. There was a soft crying off in the distance. Following it, we found a small baby, no more than a few months old, in a basket with a note."

"What did the note say?"

"I turned the note over a long time ago, but what I remember was the father was gone and the mother was unable to care for the baby anymore. She left the baby by the river in the hopes that someone would find her and take care of her."

"Who was she? Did she leave her name?"

"No, and we never found out who she was."

"What happened to the baby? And who did you turn the note over to? There hadn't been Elders for a long time, so you didn't have anyone to answer to, except maybe grandma."

"I'll get to that. We took the baby in and raised her like she was our own for two glorious years. It was the happiest we'd been as a couple, but then some traits started to become prominent in the baby. We had no choice but to do the right thing and take her back to her people."

"I don't understand. What traits? What people?"

"We thought the baby was a Red or maybe Red and human. She had a spark of magick inside of her, something that pulled us in and made us instantly love her. One day, we were playing in the flower meadow, something we all loved to do. She took off running away from us, but the faster we ran the further she seemed to get. Her speed was like nothing I'd ever seen in a Red or human child. When she reached the edge of the meadow where the scorched ground started, she came to a sudden stop and turned to face us. That's when we saw the truth of who she was in her fully gold eyes. She was a Wolf."

Wolf. The word plays over and over in my head as I piece everything together. *Wolf.* Black hair, gold eyes, about two years older than me. *Wolf.*

“Mother?” My voice is barely audible. Eyes wide and brimming with tears, I silently plea with her to say it and not make me ask.

A serene look crosses over her face, one that is usually comforting to me, but right now I’m unable to pull myself from my shock. Thankfully, she answers my questioning look.

“Yes, my powerful daughter, Samira of the Alpha Wolves was that baby.”

“Does—does she know?”

“No. There was a condition when I turned her over to them. They would never speak of us finding her or of how she came to be part of their family in order to protect her from pack scrutiny, and we would do the same for Samira.”

“And so you were left without a child and broken-hearted?”

“Not exactly. The Alphas gave us a gift in exchange for taking care of Samira and returning her to her people safely.”

“What gift could possibly equal a child?”

Slowly, a smile spreads across her face as she gazes off into the past. “A book.”

A snort escapes me before I’m able to control the reaction. “A book? Really? The Alphas played you like a fiddle, mother.”

Reaching across the table, she pats my cheek. “Not just any book, my Rose. They gave us a very valuable book of spells and magick. When the Burning Times happened, Wolves raided our homes and destroyed everything magickal. The Alphas, though furious, recognized their need for our gifts and kept some things for themselves in a failed attempt to recreate what they were killing off. One of those things was a very large, very old book. Within that book was knowledge from the generations of our people and a tincture and spell to create life in a barren womb. You see, when I returned Samira to her people I told the Alphas of our struggle to have our own children. This was their gift to us. The answer to having our own babies.”

My jaw has dropped, and I sit there staring at my mother like she's someone I don't even know. I have so many questions, but my brain can't keep up enough to make my mouth move. She throws her head back and laughs, then reaches her hand across the table and closes my mouth.

Licking my dry lips, I work hard to maintain my calm and ask my questions.

"The Alphas have our books and magickal property?"

"Yes, or they did. I have no way of knowing if they still do."

Oh, but I do, I think to myself.

"And you have magick and made yourself be able to get pregnant?"

"No, not me. Your grandma."

"Ahhhhhhh. That makes more sense. For a minute there I thought you'd been hiding magick from me my entire life."

"No, baby. You're the only one with magick in the village besides your grandma. Well, that I know of, anyways."

"Oooo-kayyyy. And where is this book now?"

"Your grandma has it, of course. It's probably in the archives."

"It's not in the archives. I would have noticed a huge, old book full of spells and such."

"You cannot find what you don't know you're looking for."

"Cryptic. Very cryptic. Who are you and what have you done with my innocent mother?"

"I'm the same person I've always been, but now you know of the struggles instead of just the good times. Remember, Rose, there will always be storms, but we must work hard to get through them to the rainbows on the other side."



A few days later, I'm finally able to catch up with my grandma, who's been suspiciously absent. Down by the river, she sits on the same log she found my clothes on when I was bathing after a tryst with Samira. Gray hair gleaming in the sun, face turned up and soaking in the heat of it, she seems at peace. So much so that I don't want to interrupt her and choose to sit quietly and watch her from a distance.

"You're welcome to come join me," she calls up to me without turning her head.

"How did you—" I cut off the question, fully realizing I forgot she's half Wolf. Of course she knows I'm here.

Taking my place next to her, we sit thigh to thigh and absorb the warm day in amicable silence for a while. The river runs smoothly with an occasional lap of water hitting the bank or a fish jumping in the distance. Birds sing and flutter about from branch to branch without a single care in their joyous little bodies. I long to be free like them, and realizing I don't have to hide myself around grandma and we're alone, I let my magick out of its confines.

Flowing from me, it feels like my entire body is stretching. Like I've been the one cramped up in a box and not my magick. Involuntarily, I reach up and stretch out my arms, flexing my fingers, straightening my legs out in front of me and flexing my toes.

"Hmmm," I hum in satisfaction when I release the stretch. My magick coasts across the ground and down into the water in front of us. A golden blanket of power flows with and through the light current. The water feels cool through it and causes goosebumps to rise up all over my body.

"Interesting," grandma says, and I turn to look at her in time to see her eyes closing and her face turning back up to the sun.

"What's interesting?"

“The gold hue of it. It’s interesting.”

“You can see it?!”

“Of course I can see it, my dear. Can’t you?”

“Yeah, I can see it, but it’s mine. I didn’t think anyone else could unless it was really intense.”

“Not something you can really test, is it?”

“No, I suppose not. Well, good to know it’s visible to some. I’ll keep it locked up tighter around other people.”

“About that, I’ve been thinking. The Wolf half of me is wild, like my magick. They are different kinds of wild but still similar in certain regards. When I keep my Wolf locked up for too long, it forces its way free. I can’t control it forever, just like one day you might not be able to control your magick. My Wolf has to run free, and your magick might need to do the same. Wild things have to be let out to run or they will overrun you.”

“Is that where you’ve been these last few days? Running?”

She sighs loudly, and looks down at me. “It’s not something that wants to be controlled, Rose. The Wolf or the magick. Remember that.”

I nod and sit quietly thinking about control, magick, power, and the fear of the unknown. And then I remember why I was looking for her in the first place.

“I found something hidden in the archives.”

“Oh?” She’s feigning shock, as if she didn’t hide it there to begin with.

“Behind some books in a hidden compartment. An old book with the history of the Reds and Wolves and the beginning of our harmonious existence. How it all started to turn when humans came and envy took over.”

“Ah, yes. I’ve read it many times. What did you learn?”

“That we once co-existed peacefully and Cordova prospered. Magick filled the land and ran like rivers through our blood. Wolves were our friends, our mates, our companions in life. Not our enemy or creatures to be feared.”

“Yes. And how do you feel now knowing the past of our two kinds?”

“I want it again. I want to live that life now.”

“It’s a hard path, Rose. One I’m not sure is realistic in your lifetime.”

“I can plant the seeds, grandma. If not for me, then for future generations of Reds and Wolves. It doesn’t have to be this way. We don’t have to live like this, separate and suspicious of each other.”

She pats my hand and smiles at me, pity barely hidden in her features. “Your heart is too big for all of us, magickal one. We don’t deserve you.”

“You do. And you deserve each other.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel it deep inside of myself. My purpose and my magick align and seal the truth of my life’s purpose. “I’m going to make it happen, grandma, and you’re going to live it. All of you are.”

“I hope so, my dear. I’d love to see that in my lifetime.” She stands to leave, but my next words halt her movements.

“Did you know May poisoned them?”

Her head snaps back to me and she takes her seat. Eyes wide with shock, I have my answer without her needing to speak.

“In her journal she wrote about a time when she was selling her herbs in the human village after her banishment. She overheard some young Wolves talking about beating her brother nearly to death for sneaking into their village again. About how they would flay his skin and eat his heart if he returned. And she snapped.”

Grandma pales, only staring at me but reaches out and grabs my hand, more for her own support than mine. I feel terrible for delivering painful news, but now that I’ve started I have to finish so she fully understands.

“The Wolves handed her a list of herbs and tinctures they needed for ailments, and she gave them things to poison them instead. She wrote about hearing of the Alphas’ pregnant daughter getting sick from what she did, but she showed no remorse. She wanted to wipe them all out so she could return to her family.”

A single tear slips down her cheek and singes into the wood of the log between us. “May? May poisoned Diona and started the Burning Times. May was the cause of our people’s executions? May?!”

She stands up faster than I’ve ever seen her move, rage pulsing through her and into the ground. I can feel it on the edges of my magick and pull it back to shield myself.

“Yes. I’m sorry,” I whisper, not wanting to push her further.

In a blur, she moves and appears next to an oak tree. Wrapping her arms around it, she pulls it free from the ground, roots intact and clinging to the soil, and throws it across the river and out of sight. It lands with a wood cracking boom off in the distance.

I don’t dare move or make a noise, instead pulling my magick more tightly around my body in an almost suffocating shield. Shocked for a moment, I marvel at myself and my newfound ability.

Shield. I can shield!

I want to shout it to the Gods but decide against it. There will be plenty of time for that later. For now, I need to take care of grandma and help her face the awful truth of someone she once called friend.

With her back to me, I see her Wolf shimmering and trying to break free, but she holds it in, containing the beast. A pained sob escapes her and the shimmer disappears, leaving only the grandma I grew up knowing in its wake.

Quietly, I walk up behind her and reach a hand out to touch her back in comfort. “Grandma, I’m so sorry about your friend. About what she did to all of you.”

There are no words for the pain I see when she turns to me and pulls me into her body, clutching onto me so tightly I can barely breathe. Rivulets of tears run down both of our faces as she holds me and a piece of her breaks inside. No matter how much I try to force my magick to fix it, it's something even I can't undo.

CHAPTER 33

SAMIRA

“Focus! You’re not weak!” I push up from the ground and shake the dirt out of my fur for what feels like the hundredth time today. Daciana growls and glowers down at me from the rock outcropping overhead. “Get your head in the game, Samira!”

Normally, I’d say her bark is worse than her bite but not today. Today she’s anxious and determined to get me into fighting shape. I’m not really sure why but can only assume it has something to do with the dead elk the hunting party found in the mountains yesterday.

“You know, instead of kicking my ass down the side of the mountain, you could talk to me about whatever is on your mind.” A loud crack sounds in my shoulder and I exhale in relief. Advanced healing has its benefits, and I’ve needed it often since she sank her teeth into me just after the sun rose.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she grumbles, large paws shaking the ground next to me as she lands and walks off.

“Then why am I talking to your back instead of your face? Avoidance doesn’t work with me, auntie.”

“Don’t you auntie me!”

Trotting up next to her, I nudge her with my shoulder in a playful gesture, but it’s like hitting a brick wall. She seems bigger today. Maybe it’s the

anger.

“Or maybe you’re just small, Samira. Ever think of that?”

Chuckling is probably a bad idea but it escapes me before I’m able to reel it in. “Stay out of my head before you hear or see something that you don’t want to.”

“I’m trying, I assure you,” she mumbles.

“Are you? Explain how it works so I can understand.”

“Emotions seem to fuel it. Helpful in battle but annoying otherwise. It’s also a proximity thing.”

“Is that why you’re so solitary?”

“No. I just don’t like people.”

“Same.”

“You like people, Samira, but you’re suspicious of everyone’s intentions and scared of getting hurt if you let anyone too close.”

“Okay. That’s enough. Stay out of my head.”

“I don’t need to be in your head to know you. I raised you, or did you forget? You’ve always been a little standoffish, even as a young girl. You tried to make friends a few times but gave up quickly when you realized something about yourself that you’ve denied until recently.”

“Oh yeah? And what is that?”

“You’re special. Unique. Always an outlier, certain sounds, textures, people touching you, smells. Even killing animals bothered you until you accepted it was a necessity for Wolf survival.”

“You’re not wrong, but I never considered myself special. Just too strange to fit in with the rest of them.”

“An Alpha never needs to fit in. And an Alpha with powers will never fit in. You were born to lead, not follow. While it was hard in adolescence, it feels empowering now, doesn’t it? Like you have something inside of you

waiting to get out. Like you have a bigger fate than you could have ever pictured.”

We stop walking, and I stare off into the forest, dazed by what she’s said. Never have I felt so seen by my family. I always felt isolated but learned to accept it. The few friends I made and kept were always and have remained at a distance. I learned to cover up what I was and how I felt and acted like everyone around me. Now, as an adult, I’ve slowly introduced a lot of things that used to bother me and am able to tolerate them for short amounts of time. Like too much noise. But then, I always find myself in the mountains or running through the forest to recharge myself in solitude.

And then the lightning strike happened and Rose came into my life. Her healing me opened up doors I never knew existed. With my darkness and gift of touch and hindsight, I feel so powerful and free. Even now, standing with her in the forest in my Wolf form, the life of the dirt beneath my feet flashes in my mind while it races around with a dozen other thoughts at the same time.

Tears well in my eyes and I struggle to hold them back. “You’re right. Like always,” I snort.

“Of course, I am.”

“Now that you’ve thrown the wisdom of your years on me, do you want to tell me what this is all about? Why you are suddenly showing interest in my training and pushing me to the brink of collapse?”

Her ears twitch and move around while she searches for sounds of other Wolves nearby. Once she’s satisfied we’re alone, she turns to me and looks in my eyes so fiercely that I take a step back.

“I had a dream,” she whispers. “In it, there was a darkness coming towards us in the form of a black storm stretching from the ground to the sky. Lightning and wind whipped through it and destroyed everything in its path. I knew it was just a nightmare, nothing to be afraid of until I saw them spinning around the vortex of the storm. Trapped.”

Shivers race up my spine and my hackles raise involuntarily. *Danger!*

“Who did you see?” I dare to ask.

“All of them. All of the dead. Wolves and Reds alike. I was still convinced it was a nightmare until I saw her.” She swallows deeply, eyes downcast and pawing at the ground. “Diona. She spoke to me.”

Her head snaps up at a sound off in the distance. Both of us turn on high alert, looking in the direction it came from.

“What did she say?” I whisper as quietly as I can.

“She said to be prepared because the past was going to repeat itself.”

Darkness. Death. *Rose?!*

Fear has me by the throat but I manage to ask the only thing on my mind. My worst fear. The only past repeating itself that haunts me with every beat of my heart. “The Burning Times?”

“I don’t know, and that’s why I’m preparing you for war, Samira. I just don’t know.”



The moons are going to be full tonight, and my muscles and blood hum with anticipation. I need to run with my pack, feel the ground shake beneath our feet, push myself to the highest peak of Mount Lunaris. It’s a release and, at the same time, a grounding of my beast, and I need it.

Rose and I haven’t seen each other for too long, the emptiness palpable inside of me. She’s mostly kept me locked out with only a tickle of her power here and there to remind me she still loves me. And I’ve done the same to her. Locking down my darkness and closing myself off from her magickal advances, I’ve kept myself in mostly solitude.

But I woke this morning with a jolt, something prickled down my spine and the urge to talk to her overtook me. It’s been hours of trying to reach out to her and nothing. Not a golden slap at my darkness reaching down

our bond and caressing the barrier she erected to keep me out. Not a whisper in my mind with her voice that I fear I may forget. Nothing.

Images of our time in the orchard and the way she called out my name, begged for her pleasure, begged for me...they haunt me now as I sit in front of my fire sipping my coffee.

“Fuck this!” Standing, I throw my cup into the fire and am out of the door before the shards of glass settle.

Auri stares at me startled from the foot of my front steps. “Uh, hi! In a rush?”

“You could say that. What do you want, pest?”

“Well, fuck you, too, sister! I was stopping by to invite you to breakfast with the family, but it seems you should probably take a long fucking walk and cool off with your grumpy ass.”

My stomach growls at the mention of food, but I ignore it. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

Propping her hands on her hips and popping one to the side, she looks me up and down with those piercing eyes and assesses me silently. “Uh huh, I’m sure you do.”

Annoyed at her for using her powers to intrude, I push past her and turn to head south towards the only place I want to be right now.

“Have fun and make sure you eat...food! Eat food, Sammie!” her chuckle fades as my feet push me into a full out run towards Rose.

I feel her the closer I get to the orchard, her golden light calling me like a beacon. Enveloping me. Coursing through me. Enrapturing me. My Rose calls to me like a siren beckoning sailors to their death on the rocky cliffs. And I’d happily destroy myself on them for a taste of her.

Stepping through the grove, I remain in my Wolf form and seek her out through the ground. My gift of feeling spreads through the minuscule particles of dirt and the tiny blades of grass until it finds the light I seek out. She can’t help it anymore. Her golden magick leaves imprints

wherever she's been like it's marking her path. While her imprint isn't visible, it's something someone like me can feel, and that worries me.

Are there others like me? Can others feel her? Is she safe?

Questions and fears whorl around in my head, but then I step through a copse of trees and glance my prize. Sitting among the trees and reading a book, she seems to be enraptured and completely unaware of my presence. Taking a cue from her posture, I lay down behind the trunk of a rather large apple tree and rest my head on my paws.

Emerald eyes race back and forth over the words, devouring whatever it is she's reading. With every page turn, she licks the tip of her finger and resumes her reading with rapt attention. She doesn't realize I'm here, and that's the way I like it. I like to watch her when she doesn't know I'm looking. It's those moments when she's the most pure, most unencumbered, most free. And she shines from within just like she always has.

They sent me on a mission to watch the unique child of a Red on her journeys to visit her sick grandma, only to lead me to the love of my life. Not a child at all, but the most powerful Red on the continent. Caring and kind, pure and innocent, I've found the greatest gift none of us knew we deserved or needed.

Letting out a long sigh, I unintentionally interrupt Rose and her head pops up. Immediately, she spots me and a bright smile spreads across her face.

"How long have you been watching me?"

Reaching down the magickal bond we share, my darkness easily flows into her golden magick, and I answer her through our shared connection.

"A while. I'm sorry to interrupt you. You looked so peaceful."

"You're never an interruption," she says aloud with more candor than I expected. "Come. We should talk, but I would love to be able to hold your hand. Could you shift to your human form, please?"

Walking towards her, my steps shimmer lightly at first then become more forceful. Muscles and sinews pop, tendons and bones rearrange, and before

I can register the pain I'm standing in front of her fully nude in my human body.

"Hello, my love," I smirk down at her, shock freezing her place.

She wrenches her eyes away from my nakedness and brings them to meet my hungry gaze. "Hello, my love. Clothes?"

I shake my head, realizing I didn't fully think this through and failed to bring anything to put over my body. Reaching into a bag at her side, she pulls out a blanket.

"Here. Take this and cover yourself up, otherwise I may go insane and forget why I called you here."

Taking the blanket from her, I wrap myself and sit beside her, pressing every part of my body to hers that I can. I revel in the warmth and tingles spreading through me at the contact. It's been too long since someone touched me. Normally, that's not an issue since I don't care to be touched, but since I've fallen for Rose I find myself needing the connection of another person. One day, Rose will be with me all of the time and the loneliness that nags at my better sense will be gone. Until then, I'll concede to my normal solitude.

Awareness strikes me suddenly. "What do you mean called me here?"

"I've been touching your barrier and pushing memories of our time together at your mind hoping I could get through to you. And it seems it worked."

"It did. I was nearly mad with lust when I left my village."

"Nearly? Well, I'll try harder next time," she smirks. The brat is begging for punishment right now, but there are more important things to discuss.

"Why did you call me, Rose?"

She takes a deep breath and centers herself. Nerves tap dance in her mind, shoving my darkness out and making room for themselves. I can't get back in, and it makes me nervous.

"Rose? Talk to me."

“I’m afraid of what it will do to you.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m still here, and I’m still yours no matter what. Okay?”

“Okay. But promise you’ll control your reaction and talk it through with me.”

“I promise.” And I mean those words when I speak them.

With a deep breath of courage, she speaks. “My magick has been helping me locate things like journals and books in our hidden archives. I was trying to find our histories and the journals of a banished Red, but something in the archives intervened. Something spiritual, maybe. I’m not quite sure. Either way, it helped my magick find what I needed.”

“And?”

“And I’ve learned a lot about our histories and our pasts. About Diona and how the Burning Times started.”

My eyes grow wide at her words. I always thought there was more, and now she knows. I need to know, too.

Grabbing her upper arms, I turn her to face me. “Tell me what you learned. Please.” My voice is more desperate than I intended, but still she shakes her head.

“No. That’s not why you’re here. We can talk about what I found through our bond another time. Right now, I need to tell you something else.”

Releasing her arms, I grab her hands instead. “Go on, then.”

“I said my magick led me to these books, but there’s more. The spirit or whatever it is from the archives showed me the way to something hidden in my own home. Something hidden beneath my parents’ bed. And it involves you.”

“Me? How the fuck does anything with your parents involve me?”

She pulls a drawing from her pocket and hands it to me. “This is my mother and father before any of us were born.” Her shaky finger points to

the dark haired baby in the image. “And this—this is you.”

My world spins. The ground beneath me feels weightless, like I’m floating and falling all at the same time. Nothing makes sense, but at the same time everything clicks into place.

How I’ve always felt a sort of empathy towards the Reds. How Laurel kept looking at me in the meeting hall, with such joy and admiration even though we’d never met. How I felt a weird comfort and connection to her almost instantly.

“Fuck.” It’s not poetic or mind-altering but the only thing I can get to come out of my mouth.

“Yeah. I know. Tell me what you need to know about your past. My mother told me everything. I can help you get through this truth, Sammie.”

Her small, cool hand reaches and clutches tightly onto mine. The contact draws my attention to our entwined fingers and I dare to ask the words aloud that my heart is screaming.

“If Laurel was my mother, then why did she throw me away?”

“Oh, baby, no! She didn’t throw you away. Not one bit. My mother and father weren’t your biological parents, obviously. They found you alone and in the woods down by the river and took you in as if you were their own. Raising you for a few years, they noticed your Wolf starting to make herself known and did the only thing they thought was right. They took you back to your own people, to the Alphas who vowed to protect and care for you as if you were their own. And you are theirs, but you know that already.”

“I do, but how do you know that, little Red?”

“My grandma has shared with me stories of the Wolves from the time I could listen to bedtime stories. Diona the brave, Daciana the strong, Damon the free with his golden eyes. Of course they could see him in you if someone like me could once I realized who you were to the pack.”

“And does that change how you feel about me? Knowing that I’m in the Alpha bloodline and an heir to the throne if it becomes empty?”

“Not at all. Actually, it makes me love you more knowing you’re faced with all of the pressure that being an Alpha entails and yet you take it in stride. You don’t cave to expectations, Samira. You live for yourself, and I love that about you.”

“There’s a lot about our family dynamic that you don’t understand.”

She smiles sweetly and looks up at me with all of the hope of young love. “But there’s time for me to learn, and I will. I promise.”

I nod my head in agreement. Rose is the type of person who puts her mind to a task and comes out successful on the other side, no matter the difficulty. And now, I feel like I have to ask her for something truly dangerous and potentially impossible.

“Rose, I need to see them. To talk to them both.”

She’s quiet for a while, thinking things through, the synapses in her mind firing quickly. And something else casts a shadow deep in her thoughts, one that my darkness notices but she’s trying hard to hide.

“What is it? I can feel you’re hiding something.”

“No. Not hiding. Just trying to work out logistics and outcomes. Do you know about my father?”

I chuckle. “We haven’t really had time to talk about our families much, so no. Is he hideous or something? Shedding disease? Cursed? Foot growing out of the center of his forehead?” I’m smiling and joking, but she doesn’t return the sentiment.

Straight faced, Rose spits out something I wasn’t expecting. “My father is paralyzed from a farming accident and bound to a chair. He rarely leaves our home.”

Without missing a beat, I solve the problem she’s been mulling over in a few words. “So, house call then?”

Relieved and beaming, Rose smiles up at me and nods. “House call then.” She grabs my hand and pulls me up, quickly turning towards her home. It’s then that she remembers I’m naked under the blanket she’s provided. “But

first, we'll need to go see grandma for some clothes. Don't want to give the old man a heart attack."

We chuckle and stand to walk, hands twining together like we've done this a thousand times, and make our way towards grandma's hut.

My mind races at what I should say to them, what I want to say to them. And the only thing it comes up with is the truth.

CHAPTER 34

ROSE

“So this is the Wolf that’s been causing so much trouble?” Grandma looks over the top of her glasses at Samira standing mostly naked in her kitchen. Pots boil away on the stovetop with fragrant heat emanating from them.

“Nice to finally meet you, Iris Riverbourne.”

She chuckles at the formality of hearing her full name. “Oh, child. Enough of that. You can call me grandma.”

Unable to contain my smile, I beam back and forth watching the two of them interact. It’s like Samira is one of us already, like she fits in perfectly in grandma’s house. I wonder if it’s their Wolves that makes it so easy.

“It is. And she’s a nice girl,” grandma answers my thought.

“Can you not do that? What if I was thinking something private?” I’m mortified because moments ago I was.

“Don’t worry I didn’t hear that.”

“Will you stop it?!” I snap at her, only for her to turn her back to me and go back to stirring the pots on her stove.

“So, she can read minds, too?” Samira asks, her eyebrows raised in astonishment.

“She can. It’s quite annoying.”

“And she’s part Wolf? When were you going to tell me, Rose?”

“When we thought it was safe. The situation with grandma and her hybrid nature is complicated. There are a lot of unknowns. How did you know?”

“Wolfsbane surrounding the house to try and keep the Wolf at bay, and she smells like a Wolf. She wouldn’t stand out among us in my village, but here where there should never be the scent of a Wolf it’s quite obvious when you get inside.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” she chuckles. “Now that you know my secret I hope you will protect it with your life, just as I will both of yours.”

“I will.” She agreed easily and quickly, not because of any fear of grandma telling our secret but because she understands how the unknown is treated among the pack.

“Good. Now let me get you some clothes. Going to meet Laurel and Jacob next?”

We both nod in unison.

“They’ll both be happy to have you. Let’s hurry. It’s the full moons. You’ll need to be home before dusk.”

Quickly, Samira changes into something presentable and we find ourselves waiting behind my house by the pig pens. Piglets chase each other around, squealing and slipping in the mud, but they aren’t enough to distract us from the difficult conversations ahead. Grandma knocks on the front door and delivers whatever excuse she’s thought of to get Bear to go to her house so we can have some privacy. Fern is due to have her baby any day and has been frantically preparing her house, and she’s thankfully absent.

“What if they want nothing to do with me?” she whispers almost inaudibly as we try to find the courage to walk through the door.

“My mother is completely enraptured with you. I saw how she couldn’t tear her eyes away while we were guests in your village.”

“Okay, true. But what if your father is disappointed with how I turned out? I mean, I’m sure there’s no resemblance now to the innocent baby he once loved. I don’t even remember that time.”

“My father is the kindest man I’ve ever met. I’m sure he’ll love you just like I do.”

“Okay, but what if they both hate me when they find out I stole their daughter?”

That I don’t have an answer for. I have no idea how my parents are going to react or what they will say. They’ve never had expectations for me of a future that involved being bonded to another person.

“You didn’t steal me. You found me and brought me out of a mediocre existence. I’m pretty sure they’ve always thought I would live at home for the rest of my life and never have a mate. We can’t trust our own people with my secret for fear of them turning us in to save themselves. No one could ever be trusted enough for me to want to be around more than necessary. Hopefully, they’ll be supportive. Worst case, I’ll have to move in with grandma.”

“So, that’s all there is? Hope?”

“Yes. Hope, and no matter what happens we’ll always have each other.”

“I’m terrified.”

“The big bad Wolf is scared of a couple of Reds? My, my, how the tides have turned in our favor so quickly. But don’t worry. I won’t tell the rest of your pack so you can save your reputation of being a badass.” I bump my shoulder into hers, trying to interject some humor into the situation.

Reaching down, she clutches my hand as we both continue to stare at the house. She’s right. We’ll always have each other.

“Okay. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

On shaky legs that I try hard to conceal, we walk up the stairs to my back door. The creaky door announces my arrival and mother calls out.

“Rose? Is that you?”

“It’s me, mother.”

“Oh, good. I need some help with—” but she cuts off her sentence when she sees Samira walking through the door behind me. “Oh!” she exclaims. “Jacob, we have a guest.” Her smile is broad and bright as she looks at Samira, who’s yet to step further inside than the threshold.

“A guest?” My father is by the fireplace shelling peas in a bowl on his lap. When he looks up he’s just as stunned as mother. “Samira,” he exhales gruffly. A soft smile spreads across his face while his eyes well with tears.

Grabbing her hand, I pull her into the house and shut the door behind her, quickly rushing around and making sure the windows are all shut with the curtains drawn. When I finish, I turn back to see them all staring at each other in frozen shock.

“Mother. Father. This is Samira. Samira, these are my parents. Laurel, who you already know, and Jacob.”

It’s then that Samira finds her courage and steps forward to shake my father’s hand. “Hello, sir. Hello again, Laurel. I’m Samira of the Alphas bloodline, and I love your daughter.”

Emotions flood through me in such a torrent that I’m not sure what to focus on first. We didn’t discuss the details of telling my parents about us, but I assumed she would be a little more tactful and feel out the situation. I assumed wrong apparently.

Both of my parents are frozen with their jaws gaped open, an expression mirroring my own.

“I, uh, well, sorry about blurting it out like that. The moment I stepped through that door it was the only thing running through my head. Better to get it out of the way first, I guess. But it’s true. Rose and I are in love and plan on living the rest of our lives as bonded mates.”

The calming voice of my father is the first to break the tension. “Well, it seems we have a lot to discuss, girls. Come. Sit. Laurel, my love, bring the bottle of the strong stuff.”

Sitting in the family area in front of the fireplace, the four of us sip on the strongest drink I've ever had and talk of the future. We talk of the former laws and our fears of exposing ourselves. We talk of my magick and red hair and of Sammie's Alpha family and the expectations put upon her. And we talk of the past and what a lot of us feel is to come.

"All of us feel it," my mother says softly. "We feel something large on the horizon that will shift the lives of everyone on Cordova. If it comes to violence, even with all of her magickal gifts, Rose can never use her magick to harm. Never. It will do something to her spirit and change her. She'll be lost to us all."

Samira downs the rest of her cup in one large swallow and sets it down on the table. Leaning forward, elbows on her knees, she looks at my mother and then reaches out to grab her hand in a reassuring gesture.

"Laurel, she'll never have to use the darkness because I hold it for her. I'll be the one to do what must be done to protect her and all of us. I will always be the one. Rose is protected. I promise you that."

Mother looks deeply at Samira for a moment and then nods and pulls her hand away. I'm not sure what she saw in her eyes, but whatever it was convinced her. My father, on the other hand, looks at Samira like he's seen a ghost. His pallid complexion and round eyes show fear that he's usually so careful to hide.

"She...her...eyes..." he stutters out, but my mother reaches over and grabs his hand, holding it tightly between both of hers.

"Don't worry, Jacob. I trust her with our most gifted daughter, and you trust me. She's safe."

I'm not sure if she's talking about Samira being safe or me, and I don't bother to ask. In the end, it doesn't matter so long as they are both on our side. And when he nods in agreement and leans back in his chair, relaxing his features, I know.

"Thank you for trusting me." She pauses for a few seconds, and I can feel her working over her next words but then she blurts them out. "And for taking care of me when I was a baby."

Once again, my parents are stunned into silence.

“Real smooth,” I whisper and nudge her shoulder once again.

“Well, it had to be said and my brain wouldn’t shut up so there it is.”

Mother chuckles, releasing the tension in the room. “Yes, there it is. I knew Rose was going to tell you, but I didn’t expect it to come up after what we’ve already been talking about. But yes, there it is. We raised you for a few years and loved every moment of it.”

“You were the most beautiful baby, Samira. Those brown eyes with their flecks of gold that grew with your emotions, the way you smiled, your laughter—” father dabs the corner of his eye. “It was a dream come true when we found you.”

“Then why didn’t you keep me? Was my Wolf too much to handle when it started to show up?”

“No, dear. Not too much,” mother says in a soothing voice. “We went back and forth for weeks about whether keeping you would be the right thing to do. In the end, we decided neither of us nor anyone in our village knew what it was to be a Wolf. We didn’t know how to feed you or nurture your instincts. We couldn’t help you through the tough years of adolescence when Wolves are notoriously moody and wild, much like other teenagers but with fangs.”

Father pulls a cord from around his neck and reveals the small bag he keeps close to his heart. I’ve often asked about its contents only to be chided for nosing into someone’s most private things, but today he willingly opens it and empties it out on the table next to him.

He reaches out and picks up a lock of blonde hair tied with a pink ribbon. “Fern,” he says and places it back down only to pick up a bright red lock of hair with an emerald green ribbon. “Rose,” he smiles at me. Next, a brown lock of hair with a blue ribbon. “Bear.” And then a black lock of hair with a gold ribbon. “Samira.” Placing them gently back in his bag, he sorts through a few small trinkets and replaces them as well with no explanation until he comes to a small piece of paper.

Unfolding it, he hands it over to Samira and I look down at it, not fully understanding why her name scrawled on a piece of paper would be so important. She looks back up at him quizzically, as well.

“That was with you when we found you. Your name written in what we can only assume is your mother’s handwriting. Since we now know who your father is and can trace his timeline, we know it isn’t his writing. Besides, a Wolf would never abandon one of their own. Not with the family your father had.”

“My mother’s handwriting,” Samira exhales softly, staring at the paper with shaking fingers.

Mother leans forward and places her hand on Samira’s shaking one. “I’m sorry we don’t have more or know more about her. We always thought she was some young human woman who couldn’t handle the gravity of raising a child alone and hiding a Wolf-human hybrid that was technically illegal under Wolf law. No one would willingly abandon their child unless they were desperate. Whoever she was knew the area was well traveled, so we think she may have been a human trader of some sort. It’s hard to tell.”

Samira is silent, still staring at the paper, lost in her thoughts.

“Look at me, Samira,” mother says in the stern tone only a mother can use. Instantly, Samira’s head snaps up and focuses on her. “You are a gift to anyone who you allow in your life. We did not give you up. We gave you a family and a life we couldn’t offer you. We have always thought about you and loved you from afar. Now, we get to love you as our family again. It’s a full circle, don’t you see? Life has a way of working out.”

Choking back a sob, Samira nods her head in agreement and then quickly regains her stoic composure. Shoulders back, eyes mostly gold and glinting in the firelight, her energy changes the tone of the room from sadness back to determination.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Life does have a way of working out. Now, we have to make sure we get to have the life that we all deserve. Something is coming for us all.”

CHAPTER 35

ROSE

Smoke still rises from the ashes of my family. I didn't believe it was true until I saw it with my own eyes and felt their essence burned into the ground under my bare feet.

I was right when I said my actions would have repercussions, but I didn't think it would be this. Ignorantly, I thought even if I happened to kill off some of the Wolves that they would focus on their own problems and leave the Reds alone. I didn't know their Alpha daughter, Diona, was mated to the Elder Riverbourne's son.

Never in a thousand lifetimes would I have imagined they would have pointed to him as the reason for her getting sick and dying during pregnancy.

But they did, and now every Elder and every Red with red hair is dead. The Wolves have burned the magick out of my people, leaving me to hide amongst the humans for the rest of my days. I hurt to the core of my being for the loss of my family, but I refuse to regret my actions. The Wolves brought this on themselves, and I hate them even more now. I hate them with every fiber of my being, so much so that blackness is all I see.

There is no sun, no moons, no flowers, no trees, no love. There's only the raging black magick inside of me, calling on me to seek revenge. Iris was with me when the smoke became visible from the human village, and she stays with me now that we are both orphaned and hiding from executions. She's the only reason I'm controlling this thing inside of me, this thing that feels more like myself with every waking day.

I don't know what the future brings, but whatever it is eats away at my soul and rots inside of me. It beckons to be let free.

I don't know how long I can contain it...
how long I can contain myself.

-May

It's been a few days since Samira and I revealed ourselves to my parents. She's gone back to her life and I to mine, both of us pretending nothing has changed until we can work out whatever this looming threat is.

Laying in my bed, it's well past the middle of the night when I read the journal entry that makes it all click. Sitting up with a gasp, I cover my mouth and take note of my family in their own beds. Thankfully, no one woke up, but now I need to talk to my grandma.

Sliding into my slippers, I throw a shawl over my shoulders and slip quietly from my home. The moons are waning but still shine almost as brightly as when they were full a few days ago. If not for the shadows and lightning bugs, I'd think I was walking in the daytime. Not wanting to be seen, I stick to the shadows until I reach the path that leads up to grandma's hut.

The windows are full of light and smoke billows from the chimney. With the gentle breeze, I can smell herbs and baked goods wafting from the house in a tantalizing temptation. She's brewing up something special inside, and my curiosity has the better of me, making me forget the reason for my visit.

Quietly, I tiptoe across her porch and peek in through a window where I see something that stuns me in place. Inside is my grandma dancing around in her kitchen, mixing things, cutting things, singing aloud and smiling without a care in the world. That's nothing abnormal these days.

But sitting comfortably at her dining table, the same dining table I've sat at more times than I remember during my lifetime, is Reika the Red, the Warrior, the fecking Alpha!

And with a mug of ale in her hand!

They chatter and laugh, sipping on beverages, snacking on a platter of things like they're old friends. Are they old friends? Surely grandma would have told me something that important. I crouch down looking on for so long my legs start to ache and my fingers hurt from clutching so tightly on the windowsill.

Finally, I give up and walk inside, plopping down at the table across from the Alpha. Taking a long drink from someone's mug, I slam it down on the table and look at both of them like they are children who've been caught doing something bad.

Landing on grandma, I narrow my eyes at her shocked expression and, in my most chastising voice, I ask, "So, when were you going to tell me you're besties with the Alpha?"

In unison, they burst out laughing. It's then that I take note of the smoke billowing from an incense holder in the corner and of the redness in their eyes and realize what this is.

"Seriously? You two are getting high? Aren't you both a little too old for mischief?"

Reika wipes the corners of her eyes and squares her shoulders just like my Sammie before speaking. Looking down on me, she smiles lazily. "Young one, your grandma and I have lived much too long to care about what's proper for women our age. You'll understand one day. Until then, best run along, little Red, before the Wolves get hungry." Her teeth gleam menacingly, but the inability to hold the threat without breaking into laughter gives her away. "I'm s-sorry!" she chuckles. "I couldn't resist. You look so serious!"

Unimpressed with her threat and her humor, I turn to my grandma. "She knows about you, then?"

"She does," grandma smiles.

"And?"

"And I've decided Iris is a friend, not a threat, as all the rest of the Reds are."

"All of the Reds or just the ones you know about?" I ask more brave than I've ever been. Realizing what I just said, I look to the incense burner and roll my eyes at the effect it's already having on me. Fresh air would clear my mind and do me some good, but I need answers and may never have a chance like this again.

“All of the Reds,” Reika answers in her dominant Alpha voice, the tenor reverberating in my chest.

Turning to grandma, I tip my head back at Reika. “Does she know then?”

“She knows now. She didn’t know then.” Grandma smothers the incense and opens a window to let in some fresh air. Replacing our ales with mugs of tea, she urges us to take sips to ward off the effects of the smoke. “We should all talk while we have this opportunity, for we don’t know when the next one will be.”

“Agreed,” Reika and I say together.

A few minutes later, our heads are clear and eyes are less red. Words come unmuddled and with the seriousness the conversation deserves.

“Why are you here, my dear?” Grandma says from her place at the table.

“I read something in May’s journal, and it got me thinking. I needed to talk to you about it.”

“You can talk to me in front of Reika. She’s an old friend. We can trust her.”

“Grandma, she ordered mass genocide on our people. She killed off entire generations of Reds and destroyed magick from the land. How is she a friend?”

“Grief will make a heart commit atrocities you would never think possible. I can’t undo what I’ve done. I can only hope to make things better for all of us.” Reika is genuine, and I want to trust her. But not with everything. Samira will decide when the right time is to tell the Alpha about our bond. For now, I’ll tell Reika and grandma what I know and hope to make sense of the damn threat looming in the distance.

Nodding my head, I swallow and take a deep breath to gain the courage I desperately need before I continue. Just as I’m about to speak, someone walks through the door. I’m stunned into silence, just as the other two women are at Samira standing there.

“Having a party without me?” she smirks.

Taking the empty seat next to me at the table, she downs an abandoned mug of ale and slams it on the table.

“Grandmother, good to see you out of the pack village.”

Reika nods in agreement. “And it’s interesting to see you out of the village, as well, young one.”

“Iris, you look well. You’re more vibrant every time I visit.”

“Well, I am trying some new herbs and tinctures, Samira. Thank you for noticing.” Grandma pats her hair with a sassy flourish and then returns to sipping her tea.

“So, what are we all here for?” Samira is not as amused as I am by the current company, probably feeling my trepidation at the upcoming conversation but not knowing the details. I haven’t had time alone to talk to her about my discoveries involving May, and the guilt of blindsiding her starts to creep in.

“I came over to talk to my grandma about something I read in May’s journal and found the two of them carrying on like adolescents. In their defense, they’re old enough to do as they please and I need to keep my opinions to myself.”

“Ah, I see. Well then, let’s hear what you came to say. The night is half over and the Alpha will need her beauty rest.” Samira mocks her grandmother from across the table in a move of immaturity I didn’t think she had in her, and it makes me giggle.

Regaining my composure, I reveal everything I’ve found, starting at the beginning of our people. Everyone else is fully aware of the harmony Wolves and Reds once lived in and the magick that ran throughout the land. They are also well aware humans brought envy and infected the Wolves with it unknowingly.

“It’s not their fault for wanting what others had. Humans have become integral to Reds and Wolves alike, as you well know, Rose. Jacob was an excellent farmer before his accident, and he’s a wonderful father.” Reika seems to know more about my family than I thought. “Most humans harbor no ill will towards either of our people, but there were a few who

put ideas into the minds of weaker Wolves many, many generations ago. It was before my time as the Alpha, and I was too young to see the damage before it was already done.”

Her statement infuriates me. I no longer care that the Alpha is sitting across the table from me, only able to see her as a woman who we all deserve answers from. “Were you too young to stop the bullying and abuse of Reds when you were a new Alpha?”

“No. I wasn’t. I was foolish and fell into the greed and envy. Instead of working alongside Reds in harmony, I demanded goods and services from them. Instead of asking, I ordered. It was a hard adjustment to Alpha. Balance is a hard thing to find.”

“And when you enacted the laws banning interbreeding, what was the purpose of that?” I demand, fury filling me. I can feel the electricity beginning to tingle in my fingers, but Samira reaches out under the table and grabs my hand. Her darkness reaches down our bond and holds my golden magick so tightly that I’m almost suffocating.

“Calm,” she says down our bond, her inner voice a soothing balm. “She knows what she did and harbors great remorse and pain because of it. Grant her some grace, my most kind hearted one. I know you’re angry and hurting, but the bell can’t be unrung.”

Almost imperceptibly, I nod and take a deep breath to calm myself. “I’m sorry for my tone. This must be very hard on you, Alpha.”

“Reika. You may call me Reika when we are in private like this.”

I nod. “Reika. Thank you.”

“But you are correct, young one. I did a lot of things I have no answer for other than because I could. Because I was filled with envy, greed, and anger towards the Reds for no reason other than they were an easy answer to problems we were having. Now that I have some time and perspective, I see my grave error.”

Taking a deep breath, I clutch Samira’s hand under the table for courage and say what I came to say. “I know what, or rather who, caused a lot of

the heartache the Wolves faced back then. I know who killed your food source, who caused years of barren wombs, and who killed Diona.”

“Who?” Reika and Samira demand together.

“May.”

Grandma drops her cup into its saucer causing it to fracture. Shards of glass and tea spill over the table while she sits frozen, her hand still in the air in the same position she was holding her now broken tea cup.

“Who is May?” Reika asks concerned as she takes in grandma’s condition.

“She was grandma’s best friend in childhood. Banished for killing a Wolf and turning to dark magick. Daughter of the Mountainbourne Elders.”

“The Mountainbourne’s. I haven’t thought about them in years. Their son was tenacious with the pack ladies, even after the interbreeding ban. We chose to limit when Reds were allowed in the pack village and that one kept coming back. Different bed every night. It’s unfortunate what ended up happening to him.” Reika looks less affected than she should be by the outcome of one Wolf hungry young man.

Unable to control my mouth, I blurt out the truth that everyone has been fully unaware of all of these years. The truth about what Reika’s laws and punishments did when her pack got out of hand and beat Timber Mountainbourne into a shadow of his former self.

“Because of your Wolves’ actions, Timber was beaten nearly to death. He was fully reliant on his family for care for the rest of his short life. Those actions are what caused all of the pain that followed at your order.”

Reika looks down her nose at me. “You have no way of knowing that. You weren’t even a glimmer on the horizon when it all started. Perhaps you should stick to the facts of your own lifetime, young one.”

“And perhaps you should step off your throne for a change and see things as they are. May fully embraced the darkness after your pack destroyed her brother. She’s the one that caused Diona’s death. Only her. She chose the actions, but you started the embers of her fury.”

“Diona died because of the baby Delta Riverbourne put in her belly. We are incompatible. They both knew that and defied me. Delta is ultimately to blame.”

I look over to my grandma at the accusations her friend is hurling towards her brother, but she only shakes her head minutely, silently pleading with me to stop talking. But I can't. I can't stand by any longer and allow the Wolves to think the Reds were to blame for any of what happened to us. I can't, and I won't.

“No. Delta was a man in love. That's all. In their ignorance and bravado, your young Wolves bragged about what they did to Timber right in front of the wrong person. The human merchant who supplied your herbs and tinctures. Only she was no human. She was the banished May hiding in plain sight. She sent them on their way with their shopping list, only it was all poison. Didn't you notice other Wolves were getting sick during the same time your daughter started to waste away?”

“I—” Reika sits with her mouth open, no words coming but her mind clearly moving through the past, searching for the truth. “I was too distracted with her failing health to notice anything else going on.”

“Didn't you notice women became barren for a long time after Diona's death?” My voice has raised an octave. I feel I'm on the verge of yelling, something I rarely do.

“I did, but I thought it was due to grief or food supply issues.”

“It was May. All of it was May. She poisoned your people, your food, cursed your waters, and tainted most of the human minds against trading with you. Because of the treatment of the Reds before and after you came to be Alpha, May was born into the darkness. You didn't start this, Reika the Red, but you damn well can stop it now. You can help us to turn history around for all of us. You can help us to live in peace and harmony once again.”

Everyone is silent, stunned in place by revelations I didn't prepare any of them for. I feel most guilty for not being able to talk to Samira first, but there was no time. And now that it's all out in the open, there's only two paths we can move down.

Together or apart. One will change everything and the other will change nothing.

Only time will tell. I stand to leave, having nothing left to say when Reika interrupts my melancholy.

“Rose?”

Turning I see the emotions warring inside of Reika, and I want to reach out my magick to soothe her but that would be a death sentence. I still don’t trust her. I don’t know if I ever fully will.

“Yes, Alpha?” I say in a monotone, exhausted voice.

“Thank you for telling me what you’ve found. It’s a lot to take in. I’ll need some time.”

“Of course, Alpha.” I bow my head at her and turn to leave again but she interrupts my steps.

“And since when do you talk, young one?”

“Oh, she talks,” grandma interjects. “But only when she has something worth saying.” The half truth rolls off her tongue so easily. I’ve always been solitary and more quiet than the rest of my family, choosing to observe and absorb rather than interact with people. But today is not the day the Alpha needs to know my full truth and why I choose a more solitary life.

“Good night, grandma. Alpha.”

Walking through the door, I feel Samira’s heat close behind me. When I hear the door shut, I turn and wrap my arms around her stomach, clutching onto her tightly for support. Strong arms and warm hands encircle me, holding my head to her chest where I hear the steady thrum of her powerful heart.

Crying into her shirt for what feels like an eternity, I’m eventually lulled by that thrum into a quiet hiccuping sob and finally silence. We hold onto each other. Me with my hands around her body and holding tightly to her

muscled back. Her with her hand holding my head to her chest and the other rubbing circles on my back.

The magnitude of what I've done and what we're doing out in the open in the Red village hits me. Once enemies, now lovers and mates, Samira and I feel right. We feel safe.

And she feels like home.

CHAPTER 36

SAMIRA

“Magick is the savior.” An ominous voice whispers in my ear, though I’m unable to see anything. Vision black, body immobile, I feel like I’m literally frozen. Strange because I rarely feel cold at all with my elevated body temperature.

“Magick is the savior,” the voice hisses.

“Who’s there?”

“Don’t you recognize me, Samira?” It sounds like a veiled threat, and I don’t want to answer but can’t help myself.

Annoyed at my current state, I retort with more attitude than necessary. “I can’t see shit through the black. How about some fucking light and we can talk like normal people?”

“But we’re not normal people,” it hisses again, but this time pain rips down my spine with a searing, blinding light. “We’re more, Samira. So much more. Embrace the pain.”

Resisting the urge to scream at the never-ending pain, I instead focus on the voice. Layered masculine and feminine, human and beast, it sounds like no one I’ve ever encountered. Zoning in, I try to use my other senses for information.

There's a smell that reminds me of the leaves piling up under trees deep in the forest and rotting. A hint of firewood. Body odor of someone who's not properly bathed in years. And blood. Old, dried blood, though I can't tell how much because the other smells are too intermingled with it.

My tongue can taste the blood more keenly, and I easily determine it's animal. A variety of animals that live on our continent.

The sound of scraping is so soft I can't hear it at first over the creatures incessant hissing and attempts to lure me in. But then it catches my attention and I can't hear anything else. Soft scraping of fingernails on wood, clothing rustling in leaves at its feet, a river bubbling in the background a long distance off.

Spinning in circles, my mind tries to put the pieces together to make sense of what's happening to me and who's doing it. But I'm abruptly pulled from my thoughts when it says something that pulls a ferocity out of me I didn't know I had.

"Sssaammiraaaa," it hisses. "Kill her. Kill all of them. Then you can be with your little Red. Then you can live without fear. Kill the Wolves, Samira."

"I will never!" I roar out, my body shaking with fury. "I will never kill my own kind! Now let me go and give me my eyesight, or are you scared of what I will do when I get my hands on you?"

Chuckling turns into laughter into a loud cackle that reverberates in my brain. When it finally calms down, it leans into me, inhaling deeply of my hair just centimeters from my ear. The smell of it so close to my body and of the saliva in its mouth brings bile up in my throat.

"Young Wolf, you'll kill them. You'll kill all of them because I'll make you. In the end, it'll be between her and them, and, as selfish as you are, you will choose her. You'll always choose her."

I will always choose her, but she will choose them over us. There's only one possible solution.

"I will save them all."

The words solidify in my body, warming the freezing cold away instantly. Achy appendages gain their movement back, and I gingerly take note of my body to ensure it's still intact. Taking in a deep breath, I sit up and open my eyes to find I'm alone in my bed.

It was just a nightmare.



The Alphas have called a meeting with the blood family, so Daciana, Auri, and I find ourselves sitting awkwardly in their living room.

“I can’t ever remember having the entire family here since before Damon and Diona...” Daciana lets the rest of her sentence trail off.

“Never?” Auri whispers.

“Never. Any idea what this is about?” Daciana cuts her eyes at me accusingly.

Training my thoughts to anything else, I intently focus on the fighting formations I’ve been learning lately and refuse to answer her for fear of her reading my mind. Auri either doesn’t notice the awkwardness between us or doesn’t care.

“I hope it’s not about fraternizing with the Reds because there are some interesting looking young men in the Crimson Valley that I want to get my hands on,” she says nervously, fidgeting her fingers in her lap.

I slap her on the shoulder reflexively with a loud thwap. “Auri! Ew! And I thought you were with Alaric.”

“Oh, I am. He’s just as interested.”

“Um, wow. Didn’t know that about one of my oldest friends. Good luck to you both, then.”

She rolls her eyes at me and points a judgmental finger in my direction. “Funny how your definition of friendship is very different from everyone else. When’s the last time you talked to him or anyone, for that matter?”

“Uh, I’ve been busy, so a while probably. Why?”

“No reason. You might want to work on that friendship thing. That’s all.”

“I’ll try.” But I really have no idea how to be a good friend like other people. I only know how to be myself, and if that’s not good enough then they can fuck off. I have bigger things to deal with.

“Like what?” Daciana asks aloud, staring me dead in my face.

Get out of my head or I’ll show you something you don’t want to see. My threat has the intended effect and she turns her head away from me quickly.

Auri’s head snaps to her, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. “Did she just —”

I hold my hand up to stop her from saying anymore. “Don’t. Please, don’t. Not now.”

Right on cue, Reika and Rikon walk into the room and take a seat together on the couch opposite ours.

“Thank you all for joining us,” Rikon says in his most soothing, deep voice. “We have much to discuss and didn’t want outside ears involved.”

Reika pats his knee in a comforting move that is usually the other way around with the two of them. “He’s right. Samira already knows much of what we’re going to discuss since she was there when I heard it, but I wanted you two to know as well.”

For the next hour, Reika talks about the revelations with May, her mistakes when Diona died, how the rest of the Reds were never the reason for the Wolves problems, and how she’s trying to have a friendship with the eldest living member of the Reds now. Iris.

She conveniently leaves out that Iris is half Wolf, but I don’t call her on it. It’s not my secret to share, and I’m sure she has her reasons. Then, she

turns the conversation to the abolishing of the anti-Red laws and what that could mean for our future.

“Of course, since there is no real magick left within them I don’t foresee any retaliation. Not a single red-haired birth has occurred in generations. We’re safe in that regard.”

No. No. This is wrong. She’s still placing fear where it’s not due. Red hair or not, they were innocent all along. I won’t let it stand, not here in private among the blood family. They all deserve to know the truth. “Were they ever a threat to begin with or was that another envious lie made up to divide us?”

Reika’s eyes cut to me and narrow, silver casting over them so quickly I would have thought I imagined it. But not anymore. Now, I know the real Reika, flaws and all, I recognize the warning for what it is. And I choose to ignore it.

“They were a threat,” she says with her voice full of finality.

And still, I refuse to let it go. “No. May was the threat. The rest of the Reds wanted to live in harmony. Stop lying to them. No more lies, grandmother. Can’t you see that’s what started this all in the very beginning? Lies.”

Reika turns to Rikon and they speak silently in the way I’ve witnessed between them for my entire life. We all watch on, waiting anxiously. Finally, they press their foreheads together and take a deep breath simultaneously.

“Sometimes, allowing the past to dictate your future is easier than admitting defeat and moving on,” Rikon says with his smooth voice.

“And sometimes people make mistakes. Even us.” Reika turns to look at us. “So, yes. May was our biggest threat that we never knew existed. She started the Burning Times. I don’t know how to move past all of this and fix what’s been done. That’s why you’re all here. We need your help.”

Auri has become still beside us, barely breathing. I don’t know how long she’s been that way, but when I look over to gauge her reaction to what’s been said it stuns me.

“Auri?” Shaking her shoulder, she doesn’t react but continues to stare off with her yellow eyes, somewhere else in her mind.

“Is she breathing?” Reika’s voice is laced with concern.

Daciana reaches a hand out to Auri’s carotid artery and checks her pulse. “She’s barely breathing, pulse has slowed to almost imperceptible. Is this normal for those like her?”

Rikon sinks to the floor, kneeling at Auri’s feet. Large, worn hands reach up and cup her face gently. Looking her over, he tries to check the rest of her body but she’s petrified in place. Sitting rigid with her hands clutched onto her knees, she’s immovable.

Unsure of what to do, an idea strikes me. “Grandmother, I understand you might have a collection of certain artifacts and books.”

She snaps her attention to me, first shock and then annoyance crossing her features. “I might, and how would you know about that, young one?”

“I have my ways.” Waving her off, I continue on urgently. “Look, in your collection you might have an answer to what’s happening with Auri. That or we could send someone to retrieve Iris and Rose.”

“Iris and Rose?” Daciana looks shocked at the mention of their names. “Why would we want an elderly baker and a mute Red for this?”

Slamming down my walls, I hope to be able to lock out Daciana as a silent conversation happens very quickly then between Reika and I. A decision is made for Reika to say what she can without jeopardizing the Reds.

“Iris is a gifted Red. A healer and a historian of sorts for them. She’s seen a lot and lived a lot of life. And Rose, while not exactly mute, has gifts of healing. If this is a sickness or something of their nature, then Rose and Iris will be able to help us.”

Daciana looks shocked, so my block worked. Something I’ll keep in mind for later and work hard to improve in case anyone else wants to go peeking around inside of my thoughts.

“I think we should get the Reds,” Rikon says from his position on the floor in front of Auri. “We can’t lose her, Reika. We just found her.”

Auri hasn’t budged, has barely breathed, and remains petrified in place like a statue. With one last look, Daciana stands abruptly and makes for the door.

“I’ll retrieve them. Shift if you want to talk to me. My Wolf will get me to them much quicker.” And she’s gone. The door slams behind her and the three of us are left staring at Auri, terrified.

“Grandparents, Alphas, I think we need to state the obvious and stop being scared to say the word when it comes to Wolves.”

“And what’s that?” Reika huffs out, exasperated by my new insistence when it comes to them.

“Magick. It’s nothing to fear. Say it.”

“Why are you pushing me, child? Can’t you see we have more important things to deal with right now?” Her hands flail towards Auri in a barely contained panic that I’ve never seen with her.

“Because you are scared to say it and that’s what this is. This is Auri’s magick. Her condition could be harmless or dangerous. We don’t know, and we’re ignorant because we act like magick is completely wiped out. But look at her. She’s proof it still exists, and it’s not something to be feared. It’s Auri.”

Rikon looks back at her again in that silent conversation. It’s clear Reika is warring with herself, with the false narrative she’s created to deal with her grief.

“I know changing your mindset can be scary. I know you want to hate them, to have someone to blame for Diona’s death and the pain you still feel in your heart, but place blame where it truly lies. Diona’s death and the pack suffering was May’s doing. And May is dead and gone, so now you need to deal with your feelings and be the Alpha we all deserve. Both of you.”

They break their silent conversation at my final words and look at me with something akin to awe.

Reika sits up straight, brow furrowed and serious. “How did you get so brave, granddaughter?”

“I have some fierce women to guide me.”

And with that, she allows something to break off inside of her and melt away.

“Then, my young brave one, let’s talk about the magick. Yours first.”

CHAPTER 37

ROSE

Washing clothes in the river used to be my least favorite chore, but since my magick came I love it. Releasing it from confinement, I once again feel safe enough to allow it to flow freely in the push and pull of the river. Like golden tendrils of seaweed, it twists and turns, sways and bobs along with the currents.

Fish swim through and bask in the warm and healing energy. Animals further downstream drinking along the bank feel it enter their body in tiny threads. I can't see what my magick is doing to them from my seated position at the water's edge, but I can feel it healing and calming them from within.

Deciding to see how powerful my magick is, I push it upstream, feeling along the banks and pushing farther until I sense something. A creature drinking at the edge of the water. Just like before, I allow it to drink in a tiny thread of my magick and feel it healing something inside the animal. The relief it feels washes through me as if I was the one being healed, and then I hear it.

A Wolf howls from upstream, right where my magick is. Panic floods through me, and I pull it back into my body with an almost painful crack. Sealing it tight inside, I rush to get my washing up. Just as I'm about to hit

the trees and thick brush that surround my favorite river spot, I hear it land on the dirt behind me.

The scent hits me. Definitely Wolf. But it's not my Wolf, and it's not grandma. My mind races at the chance of being able to outrun it, at the possibility of it being friendly, at the greater possibility of it being hostile. Does it know the magick came from me? I squeeze down on my golden gift tighter, concealing it until it's barely a sparkle inside of me. I must protect it, but how do I protect myself?

"No need to panic, young Red." The voice is feminine, powerful, familiar. "I've come in peace."

Turning, I lock eyes with Daciana and freeze. She's never met the real me. Only me pretending to be Fern during the birthing season. Does she know I can talk? What does she want?

"You're Rose Riverbourne, correct?"

I nod almost imperceptibly.

"Good. Take me to your grandmother. We need your help."



Daciana, the fierce warrior known for eating the hearts of those she kills in battle and of eating many Red hearts during the Burning Times, is standing in my grandma's garden among the Wolfsbane. The two of them are in a staredown that I didn't see coming, though I should have.

"You dare come into my village, onto my property, and look me in the face, Daciana?"

I've never seen grandma so furious. It's like the energy is pouring out of her, and yet something is tightly contained. I'm guessing it's her Wolf since she won't step away from the Wolfsbane. Glancing over to gauge

Daciana's reaction to her hostility, I can see the muscles and veins bulging in her forearms, her aura shimmering, something ghosting around her body trying to break free.

It seems her Wolf doesn't like being controlled any more than grandma's.

"I'm here as a favor to Reika and Rikon. We have a problem—"

"You have a problem alright. You dare to speak to me after what you've done without an ounce of remorse, without asking my forgiveness. Do you think I've forgotten because I'm old? No, young one. I haven't forgotten a damned thing. Now, leave!"

"Grandma, perhaps we should hear her out. If the Alphas sent her—" but she cuts me off before I can finish my sentence.

"I don't believe for one moment that the Alphas sent her, my dear. I believe she took whatever predicament they've found themselves in as an invitation to come into my village." She turns angry green eyes on the warrior without a shred of fear and points a finger at her. "You are a nuisance and a murderer, and I don't want you here. Now leave before I get really angry and send you home by carriage."

Since grandma is unable to contain herself, I take it upon myself to hear what Daciana came for.

"Look, I don't know of your shared past, but I'll listen. Speak to me." I take a step towards Daciana's back and raise my chin when she turns to assess me.

"I didn't think you talked, little Red."

"My name is Rose. And I talk to those worth speaking to. Now, talk quickly before she dusts you with powdered Wolfsbane or something."

Daciana admits defeat and delivers the news.

"My niece, Auri, is in some sort of affliction we are unfamiliar with. You and your grandmother are needed immediately. It seems like she's awake but far off, non reactive, petrified. We can't move her. She barely breathes and her pulse is almost undetectable."

Auri. Sweet, feisty Auri with her beautiful blonde hair and strange eyes. The bit of yellow flecks in them always makes me wonder, and now I have the opportunity to ask.

“What is she?”

“What do you mean? A Wolf, of course.”

“Don’t feign ignorance with me, Daciana. One look at her and anyone can see she’s different. Small, lithe, mouthy, and those eyes. Very unique. Answer my question or we’re done here.”

She’s quiet for a moment, looking me over, running outcomes through her head. Like a true warrior, analyzing and calculating probabilities. When she comes to an acceptable outcome, she speaks the truth.

“Auri came to us as an adult. She’s half Wolf, half Red.”

“Who was her mother?”

“An outlier who chose to live apart from any village in the mountains. At some point my brother Damon found her mother and fell in love. She was killed. He died shortly thereafter. Years later, Auri found us. That’s it.”

“Did you kill her mother?” I can’t help but ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“I had a big part in it.”

“And why does my grandma despise you so much?”

“That’s a story she will probably want to tell you. Whatever she says, it’s true. I did it all.”

“Hmph. Another time, then. As for Auri, what is her magick?”

She flinches at the word, a reaction I don’t bother to acknowledge. “Foresight. Outcomes. That sort of thing.” Her eyes narrow, and I realize my question has given me away but steel my reaction to the slip. “And how do you know about her having magick, little Red?”

“Again, my name is Rose. And a lot of people know,” I lie, hoping it’s believable. “Tell me what happened leading up to Auri’s current state.”

“Auri, Samira, and I were talking privately with the Alphas about our histories and the mistakes made. We were discussing ways to move forward and heal this mess we’ve made, and we all look over and find her that way.”

“Did she eat anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not that I know of, but I wasn’t with her the few hours between waking and our meeting.”

“Is there anyone strange in your village?”

“No, just the usual human merchants for a few hours.”

“And is she under any sort of stress?”

“I don’t think so. She was talking excitedly about getting to visit some of your young men with her mate and making—”she clears her throat awkwardly. “--friends.”

“Hm. Don’t move a single step from this spot. I’ll be right back.”

Walking up the porch, I usher grandma into the house so we can speak privately, although I’m sure Daciana’s Wolf hearing makes it unnecessary. Closing the door, I spin on grandma to find her facing me with her arms crossed over her chest, quite irritated.

“Look. I know you heard all of that, so what do you think?”

“I think that woman is a vile, dangerous creature who needs to be muzzled.”

“Are we actually having this discussion right now? Haven’t you always told me to forgive and show grace to the Wolves? Isn’t it in our nature, in our blood to be kind and caring towards all?”

“Yes, but—”

I interrupt her, completely uninterested in the rest of her sentence. “But you’re acting like a child right now, so shut it and think. Quiet your anger, listen to your heart.”

It doesn't take more than a few seconds for her to come to her senses. "You're right, my dear. We must hurry. Entertain the Wolf and I'll grab the necessary supplies, just in case."

"Just in case of what?"

"The worst, of course."

I turn towards the door, mumbling under my breath. "Oh that. Of course." It always seems like we're hoping for the best but preparing for the worst lately. I'm tired.

After what feels like an eternity of awkward silence standing next to Daciana among the Wolfsbane and lots of banging around inside of grandma's home, she finally emerges with her arms full of baskets.

"Make yourself useful," she says rudely as she shoves two at Daciana. "And be careful. Some of the contents are, let's just say, volatile."

The She-Wolf looks over at me with mortification on her face, but I only shrug. I have no idea what we're lugging through the forest into Wolf territory, or why I was requested. Or who would know to request me, for that matter. Surely Samira wouldn't risk me, but then again her little sister is in peril. If it were me, I'd risk anything for Bear or Fern.

A scent wafts over me, something I'm unfamiliar with but creates a strange reaction with my heightened sense of smell. I can't smell the Wolf standing next to me anymore or my grandma's Wolf. She passes me two baskets of my own and catches my eye. Raising one eyebrow, I silently ask her the question in my head.

Did you do something to mess with your scent and our ability to smell Wolf?

In answer, she nods slightly and turns towards the orchard that will be our final Red barrier before we step into Wolf territory. Laws abolished or not, I'm nervous to be walking in the forest and their territory without my red cape.

Cresting the hill, we're almost at the orchard when we hear a squeal coming up behind us quickly. Right as I start to turn, a familiar pig brushes

past my legs and knocks me to the ground, the contents of one of my baskets spilling out. The smell of fresh baked goods catches the pig's attention, and it turns to dive its snout into my basket.

“Go away, you pesky beast! Git!”

“Petuniaaaaa!!!!” a squeaky voice calls, getting louder with each shrill yell of the pig’s name. “Petuniaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!” Bear comes into site, sweaty and covered in mud. A huge smile spreads across his face when he sees me on the ground next to our rogue pig.

“Thank goodness you’re here, little brother. Petunia is ravenous!”

“I’m so sorry, Rose. I was only going to let the piglets out to play and she pushed her way past me. Been chasing her for forever! I’m glad you found her.”

“Well, that’s debatable. I’ll make you a deal. If I give you one of these baked treats to lure her home with, you bring me back my red cape.”

“Deal! I’ll be back before you get to the other side of the orchard. Where you goin’? You want me to tell mama you’ll be late for dinner.”

“Tell her I’m with grandma. She’ll understand. Now, hurry. We have somewhere to be.” I hand him a loaf of sweet bread and send him on his way with Petunia running alongside him.

Grandma chuckles softly behind me, and when I turn I see the tears leaking down her face.

“What?”

“He’ll be lucky if that pig stays awake long enough to make it home. I put so many relaxing herbs in those loaves of bread she’ll be asleep before he can see the hut.”

And sure enough, Bear is back in a few minutes with my red cape draped over his arm and an exasperated look on his face. “You won’t believe what happened on the way home!” he chirps out.

“What?” I feign shock.

“Petunia fell asleep in the Woodbourne’s flower bed. She won’t budge!”

“Noooooo!” Grandma says exasperated.

“Yep! What should I do, grandma?”

“Leave her there, little one. She’ll find her way home in the morning after she’s had a good night’s rest. Why don’t you pick some apples and take them home to your mother?” With a kiss on his forehead, he runs west through the orchard and we continue on north.

Head and body covered and secured under my red cape, I trudge along in silence through the orchard and then through the forest for what feels like a much longer time than normal. As we walk, I run the possibilities through my mind of what could be happening to Auri before I finally speak and break the tension.

“Grandma?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“What do you think is wrong with Auri?”

“It could be a few things, my dear. A vision, stuck in another plane, lost in her head, poisoned, dark magick, a virus or bacteria. There’s no way of telling until I see her.”

“It doesn’t matter what’s wrong with her. Only that you are able to bring her back to us.” Daciana is gruff but clearly worried, so grandma only grunts in response and allows the rudeness to pass.

I can’t say I’m not beyond curious about their past. I’ve never seen grandma so angry at anyone, but there will be time later to learn of that. For now, I only hope Samira is still there so I can draw on her courage and strength. Being surrounded by the Wolves who caused the genocide and near extinction of my people doesn’t feel safe. No matter what they’ve said recently.



Stepping into the Alphas' home is something I never thought would happen, but then again, this life I'm now leading is something I never thought would happen. The moment I cross the threshold I can see no one else but my Samira. Her eyes are worried, almost tearful, and flit between me and her sister. Pleading, silently pleading for me to help her.

I know what she wants without her having to say it, but surrounded by the rest of them it's not safe. I'll be outed and killed instantly. I feel it in my bones.

"Iris. Rose. I'm glad you could make it." Reika rises to greet us but grandma holds up a hand urging her to stay seated. Reika's eyes show her worry, her stress. Next to her, Rikon doesn't look much better.

"Of course we came," grandma soothes.

Removing my cape, I hang it on a hook by the door and move quickly to the only person in the room everyone keeps looking back towards. Auri looks like her spirit has left her body. Frozen just as Daciana described and without the shine and spark that makes her who she is.

Quickly, grandma unpacks the baskets on the kitchen counter and then takes a seat next to Auri.

"Any movement?"

"No," Samira answers sadly.

"Interesting." Reaching into her pocket, grandma produces a vial of something. "Before I uncork this, the Wolves might want to take a few steps back. It's quite pungent and offensive to your kind."

And yours, grandma. I snicker to myself at the snide thought but maintain control of my face.

The cork is removed and I don't smell anything, which makes me wonder if it's because she did something to my sense of smell before we left her home. However, everyone around me gags and shies away. Auri doesn't react.

"Interesting," she mutters softly as she replaces the cork and pockets the vial.

Hours pass and the light outside begins to fade while grandma continues with the same routine, testing out different vials and getting no response. After a while, she comes to a conclusion.

"Reika, where are the books?"

The Alpha scoffs and rolls her eyes. "Somewhere safe. Why?"

"You know why. I need to see them. You might have an answer to her condition."

"No." She says it with so much finality I think grandma is going to let it go, but she doesn't.

"Damnit, you old fool! This has nothing to do with property rights or egos. I need information and you might have it hidden away. Now take me to your hidden collection or Rose and I will leave. Do we understand each other?"

Everyone in the room stares at the two of them with open mouths. It's one thing to challenge the Alpha in private, but this is in front of her whole blood family. Hairs prickle on the back of my neck as I wait for Reika to react, but thankfully only her shoulders slump.

"I'm rethinking our friendship. Come along, Iris." Walking out of the back door together, they seem more like feuding teenage friends than centuries old powerful beings.

"Aunt Daciana, perhaps you and grandfather could search Auri's room and Alaric's home and see if you can find anything. We need to know where she was last night to this morning, with who, what she did, and what she ate."

“I can handle that. Father, you stay here with Auri.” Daciana looks suspicious of Samira’s request and is definitely trying to dissuade her from being left alone with me.

“It’ll be quicker with the two of you breaking up the tasks. I’ll stay with Auri and guard Rose. It used to be my job anyways, right?” Samira mumbles as if it’s a task rather than something she wants.

“If you don’t mind Alpha, sir, if I require a guard I’m more comfortable with Samira than anyone else.” I put on my biggest doe eyes and bat my lashes at him in an attempt to seem innocent. I’ve seen it work with Fern and our father, so maybe the grandfatherly Alpha will fall for it too.

Looking between us for a few seconds, Rikon nods in agreement, still seemingly in shock of the situation. With a final look of warning, Daciana leaves with him to make quick work of their tasks. Once the door closes behind them, I immediately turn to Samira and pull her into a crushing kiss.

“I’ve missed you so much.” The words come out of my mouth in a needy whimper.

Her voice husky and flowing with desire, she peppers me with kisses and gentle strokes of her tongue on my skin. Tasting me. Savoring me. “I’ve missed you more, my sweet Rose.”

Her kiss is soothing to my spirit, calming the torrent of emotions and magick battering around inside my body. But much too soon, I’m pulling away from her touch and turning back to Auri. With my hand held tightly between hers, I bite down on my bottom lip in deep thought and work through everything in my head. And the answer is obvious, simple when I remove emotion from my thought process.

“It’s her magick. She’s in a trance. I’m sure of it. We should wait her out.”

“I already knew it was her magick but couldn’t reach out to her with my darkness. The Alphas don’t completely know about me, and I’d like to keep it that way for now.”

Nodding in agreement, I hold even tighter onto her hand and kiss her knuckles softly. “I want to try something. Let your darkness free, but don’t

let go of me.”

Like a visible weight being lifted from her organs and bones, she allows her darkness to flow out of her body and directly into my waiting golden magick. Once touching, they wrap around each other forming a beautiful braid. Reaching out, they wrap around Auri’s body starting at her feet and working up to her head.

With no warning, the tip of our mutual magick sinks into the center of Auri’s forehead, and we’re jolted back. Our bodies bend backward at an unnatural angle, hands tightly locked together, but pain doesn’t come, at least not any I can feel because I’m too busy trying to take in what I’m seeing.

A meadow full of smoke. Bodies littered everywhere. Reds. Wolves. All dead and oozing black sludge from their mouths and gaping holes in their flesh. Off in the distance, a lone figure stands. But its face is concealed. The black smoke starts to overtake my sight, my lungs, and yet I’m frozen in place as I feel the figure getting closer. Fire licks at my flesh, burning me. I scream and next to me Samira screams. But unlike mine, hers is a scream of rage.

But it’s not real. It’s a vision. None of it is real.

“Join me,” it hisses. “Join me and be free, Samira.”

And I’m shocked out of the vision, her darkness urgently unbraiding from me and pulling back in her body so quickly that she keels forward holding her stomach. My magick whips around uncontrollably as I retract it and lock it down tightly with a snap. The sound of it reverberates painfully in my head, and the rush of my panicked retreat causes a jolt of pain to punch me deep inside of my abdomen. Vomit rises in my throat, but I breathe deeply and swallow over and over trying to suppress it.

“Ugh,” I groan and look over to see Samira having the same reaction. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll survive, for now. Could you make out its face?”

“No. The voice? Why was it trying to lure you?”

“I’m not sure. I have nightmares of that voice sometimes. They feel so real every time. I can taste, feel, hear everything. And it’s always similar. Darkness, death, bodies. Sometimes I’m standing on a pile of them in victory. Sometimes I’m panicking as I look for you.”

“You’re not having nightmares, Sammie. Those sound like premonitions.”

“That makes a lot of sense. I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. Do you think—” but she’s interrupted by a cold hand flinging out and clutching onto her wrist. Looking up, Auri is still frozen but her knuckles are white with the force of her grip.

“Auri? Little sister? Can you hear me?” Face pale and worried, Samira cups Auri’s cheek lovingly.

She doesn’t respond, and I’m unable to pry her fingers from Samira’s wrist. We stay frozen in place until everyone returns empty handed. First are Iris and my grandmother, who seem to be arguing about something Iris saw in her hidden collection. Rikon and Daciana come in right on their heels, having found nothing useful. But I knew that would be the case.

“What in the actual fuck?” Daciana asks eloquently.

“I don’t know, but I’m stuck here so…” Samira’s voice trails off.

As if she’s been waiting for everyone to be in one place after our failed magickal attempt at finding her, Auri’s head slowly turns to Samira with blank, white eyes. Her mouth opens and a hissing whisper speaks, the power of it making the room vibrate and my heart jolt into a terrified rhythm.

“Samira, it’s coming. It’s coming for you. It wants to claim you. It wants to use you. It wants to kill.”

Heads snap to Auri, eyes focused on the small woman with the inhuman voice taunting us from what feels like another dimension of existence. The entire room is still, no one daring to breathe or move. Goosebumps cover my body, which is now uncontrollably shaking with adrenaline and fear.

“Who does it want to kill?” Samira whispers, her terror not hidden for once.

“All of them,” the voice hisses from Auri. “It wants to kill all of the Wolves for what they did.”

Unable to control my curiosity, I dare to speak to Auri. “What is it?”

“It goes by many names. Evil. Darkness. Black Magick. It’s the beginning and will be the Wolves end, most powerful Red.”

“No!” I whisper out in shock. “No! I won’t let it hurt them,” I vow through gritted teeth.

“You are but one half of the whole,” it hisses menacingly through the lips of the sweet Wolf. “It’s coming,” the voice trails off in a final threat.

With no warning, Auri goes limp and falls over unconscious.

CHAPTER 38

SAMIRA

What the fuck did I just see? And what the fuck did I just hear?

“She’s breathing normally. Pulse is strong. Possibly in a deep sleep.” Rose says more to herself than anyone else as her hands make quick work of assessing Auri.

Rikon returns from the kitchen with crystal glasses full of a brown liquid. I didn’t even notice he left, too lost in my thoughts about what just happened.

“Here,” he says somberly, passing glasses to all of us. “This should help with the shock and warm your bodies.”

Taking a glass, I down the liquid in three deep swallows and exhale a long breath as the warmth coats me from the inside. Rose sips hers gingerly next to me, her cheeks getting their rosy color back the more she drinks.

Daciana is the first to break the silence. “Does anyone have any fucking ideas about what’s coming for us? Because I’m at a Godsdamn loss.”

“Evil,” Iris says nonchalantly like it’s obvious.

“Yeeessss,” Daciana draws out, speaking to the powerful Red like she’s a child. “But what or who is it? How do we prepare for it? How do we beat it?”

Reika sits on the couch opposite of the sleeping Auri, watching over her like she's going to wake up any moment and have all of our answers. When no one speaks and nothing happens, she lets out a deep sigh.

"Well, it seems the Wolves need to get ready for whatever this is. I'll call an emergency meeting with the pack."

Something the voice said clicks in my head. "We should do it together. All of us. Reds and Wolves."

A sardonic laugh erupts from Daciana. "Like either wants to be in a meeting hall together. Come on, Samira. Don't be naive. You can't erase history so easily, and you definitely can't erase hate and bigotry."

Desperation begins to sink in. Looking over at Rose, she gives me a nod and grips my hand in support of what she knows I have to do.

"My family, my blood family, I've been keeping secrets from you all. And no matter what threat we face, I want to tell you my truth so you can understand why I must do what's necessary to stop this threat. No matter the personal cost. Sit. All of you."

Rikon takes his place next to Reika, Daciana sitting on her other side, while Iris comes to sit on Rose's other side and holds her hand gently. Auri remains asleep, and I find myself desperately wanting her awake so I can have someone completely on my side.

"Talk, young one." Reika says in her slightly subdued Alpha voice, and I notice that for the first time it has zero effect on me. Not even a little.

Odd.

"Family, you all know I'm different. I have been from the moment I came to you, but what you don't know is how different. While you've been raising me to be a warrior like Daciana, strong like Rikon, and fearless like Reika the Red, I've always known and felt apart."

"Oh, granddaughter, we never meant to make you feel that way. You've always been and will always be one of us." A tear trails down Rikon's face, his words slamming into my chest.

Taking a deep breath, I hold up my hand to silence them and continue. “Let me say my piece before my courage wavers. You’ve only made me feel loved and accepted. It’s not you. It’s me. It’s something deep inside that calls to me. It sings to me. When Rose brought me out of the fever and saved me, I returned a different person with something deeply hidden finally unlocked.”

I pause, afraid of what I’m about to say, but Rose squeezes my hand reassuringly. The feel of her warmth and love gives me the strength I need to carry on with what I once thought was impossible but now see as necessary.

Speak your truth, she whispers down our bond.

Tears begin to well in my eyes, but I clear my throat and push on as a few escape and cascade down my face.

“I have a gift, like many of our kind do and hide for fear of punishment.”

The Alphas are silent, staring at me with wide shocked eyes, but Daciana next to them nods her head and urges me on.

“Dark energy lives inside of me, and until now I’ve been afraid to call it what it is. But now, it seems there are bigger threats than punishment or death. I have dark magick.”

My grandparents suck in a deep breath but say nothing. I catch a glimpse of their hands twitching and realize they’re speaking to each other in that special way they have. And for the first time, I realize it’s the same as how Rose and I talk to each other.

Glass shatters as it hits the floor, the shards making a tinkling sound and finally coming to rest in a silent room. Looking down, I realize it’s me. I’ve dropped my glass, but at this moment that doesn’t matter.

Head snapping up, I narrow my eyes and point my finger at the two of them. “You two have magick!”

Nodding, Reika reluctantly admits their secret. “It came to us one night when we were separated in the mountains. There was another attempted coup, but on that night Rikon and I were pulled away from each other in

different battles. Desperation distracted me from my hunt, so I reached out in my mind to him and found him so easily. It was like breathing. Ever since, we've had a way of communicating with each other that we've kept secret."

"Did you or did you not know it was magick?" I demand, furious for the lie.

"We knew," Rikon answers in his soothing tone. "We knew but thought it was best to keep it to ourselves. The implications, the mistrust among the pack, the potential violence that would result from the Alphas having magick wasn't something we wanted for the pack."

Glancing to Daciana out of the corner of my eye, I realize she doesn't look surprised and I wonder if she already knew. She nods her head in confirmation, and I wonder if they know about her. She shakes her head 'no'.

Tell them. It's time.

Sullen, she looks down at her hands and fidgets with the mating ring she's never taken off. After a few moments, she squares her shoulders and turns to her parents and speaks in a voice that commands attention.

"Mother. Father. I have magick, too." They both suck in a breath, and she holds up her hand to silence the questions. "I can read thoughts of the blood family when you're close. I've known for a while." Then her head snaps over to me and she narrows her eyes. "There. Happy?"

A wide smile spreads across my face. "Yes. Very."

Iris takes the awkward silence that follows as an opportunity to work out the thoughts churning around inside of her head. "So that I understand," she takes in a deep breath, preparing for a tirade that Rose seems amused about. "Samira has dark magick, the devil Wolf can read minds of the blood family, the Alphas can mentally talk to each other, Auri has foresight and premonitions, and none of you ever put it together that Wolves are magickal just like Reds? The three of you created and actively participated in a genocide and never put it together?"

They don't speak, too shocked to answer her or because she's speaking to them like they're petulant children.

"One half of the whole," she mumbles to herself. Dropping Rose's hand, she stands up and begins to pace in front of the hearth. "Our half is definitely the brains."

It's then that Rose decides to speak up and reveal what she knows. "I know what that means," she says loudly, no longer a skittish mouse among predators. "The history of the Wolves and Reds tells of a time long before any of you existed where our people lived together harmoniously and the land thrived with magick. It makes sense when you think about it. Together, we are whole."

"We have to do this together," I say feeling full of pride for my brilliant, little Red. "And in order to do that, we have to stop having secrets and living lives full of hate and suspicion towards each other. The Reds aren't dangerous. They never have been. We need to heal ourselves, eradicate the evil coming for us, and heal the land."

"We deserve to live as our ancestors did," Rose chimes in.

My blood family stares at me like I'm a stranger, but then their eyes start to soften as they work over everything that's happened. A quiet stirring from the couch in front of me draws my attention.

Auri sits up and yawns deeply, arms and legs stretching and popping with relief. Looking around, she takes in the serious expressions of everyone in the room. "What did I miss? Did you tell them about you and Rose, finally?"

Reika and Rikon snap their heads to me, and Daciana slaps her forehead.

"No, but you just did," I deadpan.



Sitting next to Rose and Auri among the trees, I flinch at the crashing sounds coming from inside of the Alphas' home.

"Yikes! I really didn't think they would take it this hard." Auri cowers next to me at the roars coming from inside.

Smacking the back of her head, I sneer at her for causing me more drama than I need right now. "You never think, pest. Just blurt shit out like everything is going to be okay."

"Well, it usually works out, doesn't it? Besides, she's all bark and no bite." Glass shatters and a chair lands on the ground a few feet from us. "Maybe a little bite."

"Why is grandma in there with her when she's flipping out? If she hurts her..." Rose lets her statement trail off because there is no world in which Iris getting hurt would be okay. Not for her.

Patting her hand, I try to offer some comfort but my words don't come. There's nothing I can say really. My grandmother is furiously roaring inside and trashing her home while Iris tries to use whatever magick she has hidden to calm the beast. I hope it works before she tears the walls down.

Auri crunches on something next to me, drawing my immediate attention. "Where the fuck did you get an apple?!" Her audacity in tense situations never fails to astonish me, and this is one of those times.

"From the orchard." She looks at me like I'm stupid and then rolls her eyes.

"The orchard? The Crimson Valley orchard that is off limits?" I can feel the blood starting to creep up my neck at the thought of any Wolf other than me crossing into Red territory. That orchard is special, especially now that Rose and I share a memory there. I don't want any Wolves in it at the risk they draw in others.

"Uh, yeah. Duuuuhhh. The laws are gone, and I can go wherever I please. Besides, a nice little boy invited me in to play with him."

Rose's head snaps to Auri, eyes suspicious and narrowed. "What did this nice little boy look like?" she asks through gritted teeth.

"I dunno. Like most kids. Dark hair, freckles. Uh, small-ish?"

Rose's ears grow red and the veins start to throb in her neck. "And his name?" she seethes.

"I don't remember."

"Try harder," Rose demands, her teeth gritting hard together like she's going to break them off.

Auri balks at Rose's change in demeanor. Never having seen her so angry, or really angry at all, this can't be good.

"Ummm, it was some kind of animal name. Rabbit? Rooster? Bear! It was Bear. Nice kid. We played hide and seek, and then he sent me home with a satchel of apples."

"I'm going to kill him! One rule is all he had to follow. One! And he can't even do that!" Her voice hits an octave that shakes the birds in their nests above us.

"So, I guess you know the kid?" Auri asks timidly.

"He's my brother."

"And why are you so upset about him giving Auri apples?" I ask softly, trying hard not to rile the little beast.

"It's not the apples. It's talking to people we don't know, especially fully grown Wolves. Look, I trust the two of you—" She looks over at Auri and arches an eyebrow at her. "--mostly, but there is a long history of malice that can't be erased with some pretty words that stop oppressive laws. We're talking about lifetimes of control and abuse. Lifetimes of violence and murder. Your people killed off most of my people, and then ate their hearts for good measure. Do you truly believe all of that is easily forgotten on either side?"

Auri and I are silent for a long time, both pale and staring at Rose wide-eyed.

I clear my throat and answer her, uncomfortable at her bluntness but appreciative that she trusts us to share her deep feelings with. “No. I know they’re not. Maybe I was naive in hoping it would be easier. That the path to us being together would be simple now, but your feelings and how Reika is acting shows me it’s going to be much harder to convince each side.”

Auri touches both of our hands and pulls them together with hers, squeezing. “We’ll do it together.”

“Auri, I know you’re a good person, but you don’t know everything about me. It might not be safe for you to align yourself with me until we get through whatever this thing is that’s coming. Then, maybe I can convince them that Reds are truly safe.”

The look of incredulity on Auri’s face makes me jolt. She knows. “How long have you known, Auri?”

She taps her head. “Visions. Remember?”

Rose looks between the two of us, annoyed at being left out of the partially unspoken conversation. “What? What does she know?”

“About your secret, Rose.” Reaching out, Auri tugs gently on a lock of the brown wig hanging from Rose’s shoulder. “But don’t worry. Some of us can see the truth through all of the bullshit. I’ve got your back, Red.” And then she winks. She actually fucking winks while I feel like my heart has stopped in my chest.



A long while later, Daciana emerges from the house with a quickly healing black eye, Iris fast on her heels with a smug look on her face.

“I apologized, Iris. You got in your punch. Now, fuck off!” Daciana fumes as she storms down the path towards her home.

“You think an apology will erase what you’ve done?” Iris yells after her.

With no warning, Daciana stops mid stride and turns on her heels to face Iris. They stand nose to nose, while the three of us sit among the trees looking down at what looks like a fight brewing.

“Look, old woman, I told you already. I didn’t know he was your husband.”

Auri leans over and whispers to both of us. “Any idea what this is about? Because it sounds like Daciana fucked your grandpa, Rose.”

“Ew! And no. Not possible. He was devoted to my grandma.”

Iris rages, pressing her chest into Daciana’s and puffing up like the Wolf is about to explode from her skin. “You are a bully, oh great warrior. Nothing more than a bully. He was a sick man and you chose to terrorize him for your own amusement.”

Surprisingly, those words make Daciana bow her head. “I didn’t know he was sick at the time. It was a mistake.” Her head snaps up and she narrows her eyes in challenge at Iris. “Besides, aren’t Reds supposed to be forgiving and peaceful? Why are you so angry? It’s been more years than I can remember since that happened.”

The words only serve to infuriate Iris even more. Becoming blurry, the edges of her body begin to vibrate as the Wolf starts to press its way out.

“Rose, you have to stop this. They can’t know. Not yet.”

“I’ve got her.” Closing her eyes, Rose becomes very still. The ground beneath us shifts slightly, almost imperceptibly as she flows her magick down into the soil to Iris’s feet. The tiniest threads of gold poke through the ground and wrap around Iris’s ankles, and then they’re gone. Like a switch has been turned off, Iris takes a step back, her face wiping clean of all anger and malice, the sweet grandma once again in her shoes.

Head bowed in shame, Iris looks down at her hands fidgeting, seeming embarrassed by her reaction. “I’m sorry for my behavior, Daciana. You’re right. Reds are forgiving and peaceful, and I should have tried harder to embody those traits. Let me tell you this before I leave and then we’ll

“speak of it no more. Grudge gone.” Iris takes a deep breath and looks into Daciana’s eyes as a tear glistens down the grandmother’s cheek. “Matthew was everything to me. He was the sun and the moon, the air I breathed, my reason for being. He was sick, and there was nothing I or anyone else could do to save him. Every day he lived was a gift, and you terrorized him to the point of near death. Because of your actions, your choice to act out your personal hate of Reds on my human husband, he left us much too early. His fragile heart couldn’t handle the nightmares and constant fear he lived in because of what you did. And for that, I was a widow much too soon.” Tears stream unkempt down her face now as she looks up at a remorseful Daciana. “You’re a widow. You know what this feels like. I only hope you’ve learned something from what I’ve shared with you today. For now, you’re forgiven and we’ll never speak of this again.”

Iris holds out her shaky hand, but Daciana only looks down at it, confused. “Why would you forgive me for that? I would never and will never forgive whoever killed my mate.” Her voice is husky as she holds back her own tears.

“Because I’m too old and too tired to keep feeling this way. You’re still young. Well, young in comparison to myself. Grief eats away at your spirit, warrior. One day, hopefully soon, you’ll learn to forgive and move on.”

Daciana shakes her head in agreement and seals her hand with Irises. Maybe, if they can mend their feud then there might be hope for the rest of us. Even if it takes a bit of magick.

CHAPTER 39

SAMIRA

It's been a few weeks since the Alpha found out about Rose and I and destroyed her home in a rage. Not fully understanding the reaction, I've put it out of my mind for now. There are bigger things to worry about.

Today is the meeting between the Wolves and the Reds. Getting the entire Red village to agree to meet with the entire pack wasn't easy, but the Riverbournes convinced them to give us a chance. It's supposed to band us together against whatever this thing is that threatens us. Still, not knowing what it is keeps me up at night. Auri only has glimpses of dark smoke and death, blood and carnage.

"Hey, do you think this evil is the smoke? Maybe it doesn't have an actual form like a person. Maybe it's energy." Auri has been wracking her brain and trying to talk through her visions anytime we're alone. The rest of the pack still doesn't know about Wolves having magick or of our shared history with Reds, but one of those will be resolved at the meeting today.

"I don't know, little sister, but what I do know is I need you to forget about that for a minute and focus on the outcome of this meeting. Do I need to prepare for a fight or coup? Should Rose and her family stay home? It's driving me insane not knowing how this is going to turn out."

She looks at me over her mug of ale like I've grown an extra head. "Don't you think if there was something to be worried about I would've told you. Get a grip! We have bigger things to focus on."

"There is nothing bigger than Rose. She's everything," I murmur. Raising my mug, I empty it in a few swallows and slam it down on the bar. "Another one!" I shout to Varg, who's been conveniently busy in the back room while I fester in worry and built up anger. Stiffly walking over, he fills up my mug and returns to the back room quickly. "Thank you!" I call after him, embarrassed by my rudeness.

"You're pleasant today," Auri mumbles into her mug.

"I'm stressed the fuck out today. It feels like the entirety of existence is about to cave in on us and there's nothing I can do about it. Like we'll be here one minute and poof! Gone the next."

"Life is kind of unpredictable like that. Good thing you have me," she smirks, nudging my shoulder.

"How are you so confident? You're not infallible. Shit could go sideways real quick."

"True, but then I'll help you get it back in line. Samira," she grabs my arm and turns me toward her. Both hands on my shoulders, she looks me in the eyes with all the seriousness she can muster. "I've got you, and you've got Rose, and we all have the both of you. Together you are the ultimate power."

"But how? How does that work?"

"Not a clue, but you'll figure it out when the time comes."

"Great. Staring into the hellmouth and then it'll hit me. That's comforting."

"What time is it? Alaric was supposed to meet me here before the meeting and—"

Right on cue, the young warrior walks through the door of the pub and closes the distance between himself and Auri in quick strides. With no

trepidation or discretion, he crushes his lips to Auri's like a starved man. Wrapping his arms around her small frame, he pulls her tightly against his body and melts into her.

Normally, I'd be grossed out by seeing my sister suck face with some guy. But the way he holds her, the way he cherishes her, it makes me happy they found each other. And, if I'm being honest with myself, just a little jealous that I can't do the same with my Rose. Deeply missing her, I vow to never hide my feelings or affection in public after all of this is over.

If we aren't dead.

Pulling away shyly, Alaric clears his throat. "Sorry about that. I missed you," he exhales, holding her hands and looking at her like she's a goddess.

"No need to miss me if we live together," she teases.

"Live together?!" I blurt out.

Auri tucks her hair behind an ear and smiles brightly. "Well, not yet, but we were talking about it."

Thinking over the time she's been with us, I didn't realize they were that serious. I thought it was casual, but being distracted must've made me more absent than I thought.

"Whatever makes you two happy. Life is short and all that." I state dryly, waving them off with a hand.

Downing the rest of my second mug of ale, I stand and straighten my vest. Made from the finest leather and lined with fibers and small plates of metal, my fighting leathers give me the confidence that I'll be ready if something happens during this meeting.

Glancing to Alaric, I notice he's wearing his leathers, as well. It seems my concerns aren't misplaced.

"Let's go or we'll be late." Without a backward look, I push through the doors of the pub and into the light of the morning, ready to take on whatever the fates have in store for us.



It's loud. Much too loud for my liking, but everyone seems to be somewhat calm on the pack side. A few of them look over to the Reds on the other side of the meadow and sneer, but for the most part the Wolves seem to be indifferent.

Our guests, however, are not. Choosing the flower meadow next to the scorched grounds was a mistake, but the Alphas insisted. Red eyes dart from Wolf to Wolf and off into the distance where the darkened trunks of trees and black ground are visible.

Taking my place at the head of the Wolf side of the meadow, I motion for the pack to take a seat. The ground has dried from the early morning dew, and the birds sing off in the distance. Nearby, the river rushes a soothing melody of promises and life. But none of that hits my senses the moment I lay eyes on her.

Rose. My Rose sits in the front of the group of Reds next to her little brother who is tearing up flowers and crushing them while she weaves others into crowns. One sits atop her brown wig, making her look like an ethereal queen of the meadow. I yearn to see it on her red hair glowing in the sun one day and vow to make it happen. Behind her sits Fern holding her new baby boy with his bright red hair peeking out from under a bonnet and the Woodbourne family who are looking none too pleased to be here.

Fern locks eyes with me, fear and suspicion radiating from her as she clutches the baby tight to her chest. In a small motion, I reach up and tug on the front of my hair, signaling to her to the baby's hair is showing. Emotions war within me for not fully trusting my own people, yet. I wonder if Rose knows about the baby but don't reach out to speak to her when things are feeling so tense.

Standing in front, Iris and Laurel wear calming masks to quell their fears, or attempt to, because some of the Reds look ready to run. And I don't blame them. None of us do. Wolves outnumber the Reds five to one.

We've killed off their entire community and terrorized them for generations and now we call them to a damn meadow next to the place where we committed mass genocide against them. A place that feels like death and ghosts haunt it, where no life grows and no animals live.

"Friends," Reika booms from behind the seated groups. "Thank you all for coming." Walking between the two, the Alphas make their way towards the front and shake hands with Iris and Laurel before coming to stand next to me. Daciana avoids the attention and appears next to me without a word. As usual, Auri stands off to the side, or rather sits, fidgeting with flowers and seeming mostly bored.

Iris speaks first and addresses her own people. "Family and friends, we're here to listen to the Alphas about a threat looming over all of us. Only listen. I ask that you stay until the meeting is over and voice any concerns you may have at the end. I know we have a long history with them and you may not trust them, yet. But you trust me. You trust the Riverbourne family. For generations before you, the Riverbournes have lived in the Crimson Valley and taken care of the Reds and Wolves alike. We've never asked for anything in return other than your friendship, but today I come asking you all for a favor. Listen with an open heart. That is all."

No one says a word, but they all seem to relax a little at her words.

"Pack, you hear the intentions of our guests, and I'll ask the same of you. No more violence, no more hate. You will listen with an open mind and calm beast. Your Alpha demands it," Reika says using her commanding tone that no one in the pack can disobey.

With his calming demeanor, Rikon steps forward and tells the oldest story we know of Wolves and Reds living in harmony and the land teeming with magick. He paints a picture of wonder and happiness with our people intermingling and creating new life and love together. He talks of the endless possibilities that were ahead of them. And then, he talks of the humans coming and bringing envy, an emotion that never existed between us. Whispers of jealousy and greed were allowed to infect the Wolves, and we were never the same again.

Breathing deeply, he unfolds the events that led up to the Burning Times. He tells them the truth of Diona and Delta's love, and the rage and pain they felt when she wasted away during pregnancy. How their already biased minds allowed them to easily place the blame on Delta and thus the rest of the magickal Reds.

"And we all know what happened next. That's why you're all here, in the eye of the scorched ground. Because we want you to see our past, to know our mistakes, to hear our deep remorse, and to move forward in a future where we once again live like our ancestors."

Scanning the two groups, the pack is stunned at the revelations, all unmoving. While next to them, the Reds hold each other in comfort, most of them crying with deeply held pain.

Gods, what did we do? We have to fix this.

Iris steps forward and speaks. "My most magickal people, don't fret because all is not lost."

Oh shit! She's going to say it in front of everyone. My heart beats rapidly trying to escape my chest. Looking to Rose, her eyes widen in horror, and the need to rush to her and protect her almost overwhelms me. Just as I'm about to step towards her, a small hand wraps itself in mine.

"Don't worry, big sis. It's going to be fine," Auri whispers. She holds onto my hand, calming me with her presence.

"Wolves and Reds, magick still lives among us. I, Iris Riverbourne, am the oldest living Red in Cordova. I have lived for generations, much like the Alphas. My parents were Lily and Laken Riverbourne, the last of the true Riverbourne Elders."

Audible gasps sound from the Red side, while only a few Wolves understand what she's saying.

"It doesn't matter how or why I've lived so long, only that you understand where I speak from...the past. I was there when the Wolves came for us. My brother was Delta, the mate to the Alphas' Diona. They wiped out my entire family on the ground just behind me. I've seen a fraction of what Cordova once was and what it's become and mourn for the past. I don't say

this to cause any more pain but to make you understand. Out of all of the Reds, if anyone should hate them, it's me. But I don't. I've forgiven them, so I'm asking you to do the same. For all of us."

Heads nod in agreement while a few of the older Reds sit stunned. Faces pallid, tears streaming, Red faces timidly turn to look at the pack next to them, curious and questioning.

Reika steps forward and speaks next, addressing both side. "Friends, Iris said it and I confirm it. Magick still lives in this land and among a chosen few. It doesn't matter who has it, only that it exists. It always has, and there's no danger. Lies, anger, and grief created the fear of magick. I'll shoulder the blame for that as your Alpha. But now, we'll accept the magick and keep living our lives while it hopefully returns to its fullest extent. None of this is the primary reason you were called here today. Something is coming for the pack. Something dark and deadly that wants to kill us all, and we'll likely need all of us to save ourselves."

"Why should they care if something is coming for us?" A Wolf shouts from the back.

Laurel steps forward, her motherly eyes warm and endearing. "Because without one, the other cannot live. We are two halves of a whole. The land demands balance. Don't you feel it as you sit among the flowers and feel the sun beating down on you? Listen to the wind. The Gods speak in its breezes, whispering the truth of the land."

Some of the Wolves look at her like she's gone mad, but most of them are able to sense what she's saying is true. It's always been here, but we allowed our hatred to silence it.

"What's the threat?" Fayez demands, stepping forward from his position next to the Reds.

Auri lets go of my hand and moves in front of everyone, head held up and shoulders back. "I'm Auri, granddaughter of the Alphas. Most of you don't know me because I was lost for a long time, but I'm here now and I've seen the threat."

"Where?" Alaric barks, body tense and ready for a fight.

“In my visions.” Everyone gasps. “Yes, it’s true. I carry magick. A Wolf with magick seems impossible, but here I am. In my visions, I’ve only seen it as black smoke, but that’s not the important part.”

“What is? And how do you fight smoke?” Alaric asks, truly confused.

“It’s spoken to me, through me, and given itself many names, but the one that most of you can understand is Evil. Whatever this is, it’s true Evil. It wants carnage and will stop at nothing to destroy the Wolves.”

Fayez looks dumbstruck, something I’ve never seen on the great warrior. “How do you win against Evil?”

“With balance,” Laurel chimes in, a large smile on her face.



After the meeting, we all stand around awkwardly in forced proximity. The Alphas and Iris have asked us to mingle and get to know each other, find some common ground to build relationships on. Varg in his cantankerous, old age is standing off on the side looking highly annoyed and ready for a nap. In the twenty-four years I’ve been alive, I’ve never seen him outside of the pub for more than a few minutes. And yet, here he is glancing at Iris from across the meadow like a lost puppy.

I shoot out my darkness and glide it across Rose’s golden magick for a moment, signaling I want to talk. From my vantage point at the front of the two groups, I see her standing off to the side watching and waiting. When she feels my touch, she sighs deeply and lets down her walls so we can talk.

“Does your grandma have a thing with Varg?”

“Uh, no. She doesn’t have a thing with anyone, and who’s Varg?”

“The ancient bartender.”

“Oh, him. From what my mother says, he’s an old family friend. I don’t know the details, but probably someone from my grandma’s past lives. She’s mysterious that way.”

“That doesn’t explain why he’s looking at her the way he is right now.”

“How’s he looking at her?”

“Like he wants her.”

“Well, he can want but he can’t have. She swore off partners the moment she met my grandfather. When he died, she never took another companion. She says she’s still married to him, whether he’s on this plane of existence or not.”

I sigh deeply and loudly causing Auri to look over at me and arch an eyebrow in question. Waving her off, I think of Rose and what I would do if I lost her. Without question, it would be the same as Iris. It’s her or no one. Period. Strange how I went from hating this tiny Red to giving her my heart...

My thoughts are abruptly interrupted by the ground rumbling beneath my feet.

“Groundquake!” People yell as they run, like it’s possible to get away from nature when she’s angry.

Laurel grabs Fern with her baby and Bear, running off towards the bridge that leads them back to the Crimson Valley. Rose’s father, Jacob, is left behind while his children are taken to safety. In a flash of red, Rose appears next to him donning her cape like a safety blanket and begins to push him through the brush to the bridge. But his chair doesn’t move so easily through the flowers, and she’s barely making any progress as frantic people rush past her. Before I realize what I’m doing, I abandon my post and my blood family and rush to her side.

“Hey. I’m here. Together now. Push!”

We get Jacob to the bridge before the ground becomes so violent that we have to stop.

“What is this?” Rose asks, terrified.

“It’s a groundquake.”

“No, it’s not. Reach your magick out. Feel it, Samira.”

Turning around, I see the chaos unfolding. People scatter as the ground breaks open creating large caverns here and there. A few children stand crying for parents that have abandoned or forgotten about them. My blood family stands fearless and resolute while the Guard helps people off the ground and away from the meadow. And Iris, with her green eyes glowing like I’ve never seen, stands fearlessly facing the wind that whips and tousles her hair about her face.

Doing as Rose said, I reach my darkness out and let it flow into the ground in search of the unknown. Goosebumps erupt all over my skin and my hackles rise when I immediately feel it. The more I stretch out my darkness, the more I realize it’s everywhere.

We’re surrounded.

CHAPTER 40

ROSE

How do we escape something that's everywhere? How do we win against something that we can't physically see?

Looking over at Samira, her shoulders are back, her head is held high, and she radiates ferocity. Muscles bulge on her arms as her Wolf begs to come out. In her fighting leathers, she's every bit the warrior I always knew she was. In this moment, she looks more terrifying than any Wolf I've ever seen. But I'm not scared.

"Samira, we have to get the rest of them to safety."

"Where's safety when it's everywhere?" she asks through gritted teeth.

"Then what do we do?"

"Come," she barks and takes my hand in hers. Rushing towards her family, she pulls me along behind her, my much shorter legs working hard to keep up.

The Alphas stand much like grandma now, facing down whatever is coming over the hill and through the scorched grounds, aiming directly at us. The ground has stopped ripping apart and now we stand in a deadly meadow of trampled flowers and instant death if we take one wrong step. Beneath our feet, the quaking has changed and grows stronger. Now, it

feels the same as when the deer are spooked and stampede through the forest. But there are no herds of deer outside of the forest and mountains.

“What is that?” Daciana hisses.

Next to her, Auri stands still, staring off into a vision. “It’s people. Lots of people.”

Alaric stands guarding Auri on her other side, his fangs protruding and ready for a fight. “People? What people?”

She smiles wistfully, sadly. “My people. The ones I lived with who planned the coup. Daciana, it’s the group we watched on our scouting mission months ago.”

“What group?” Reika barks.

“Mother, it was nothing at the time. Just some lones and humans living in a peaceful commune in the forest. They were harmless.” Daciana looks shaken but quickly fixes her expression and puts back on the warrior mask.

“Clearly they aren’t harmless anymore,” Rikon grumbles.

Around us and on our sides, the Guard stands ready and willing for battle. We don’t know what they want, but if it’s like the past then it’s the Alpha’s throne.

I have to do something. Two halves of a whole. Freeing my hand from Samira, I step forward. “Alphas, I’ve been keeping a secret from you all and I fear now is the time for me to reveal my true self before it’s too late.”

“Now’s not the time for coming out, little Red. We have a battle coming at us.” Daciana doesn’t stray her eyes from the incoming foe and waves a hand to brush me off.

Quietly, I remove the pins from my wig and then toss the brown mop to the side. Shaking out my wild curls, I walk on quiet footsteps that take me front and center. With my head held high and the sun at my back illuminating the red hair I’ve been hiding for so long, I say to them what I’ve wanted to say my entire life.

“I’m not a threat, not a danger to you, but the answer to everything that is wrong with our home.”

Wolves gawk at me like they’ve never seen me before, while the ground shakes so violently standing is difficult.

“I will fight with you and for you, Alphas.” Bowing my head, I wait for approval.

“Very well, then, young one. But don’t die or your grandma will take my life in return.”

I chuckle and look over at grandma, whose eyes are full of tears and pride. “Don’t worry, Alpha. I won’t die.” I don’t bother to tell her that I don’t know if I can.

Moving to stand next to Samira, I pull two scabbards from beneath my red cape. “Let’s do this, then.”

“Rose, you can’t take a life. It’s against your entire nature. You know what it could do to you.”

“I do know, and I have a plan for that. Trust me.” Wrapping my arms around her neck, I seal my lips over hers. Kissing her for what might be the final time has my heart nearly breaking already. My plan has to work. There’s no alternative life I’ll live without Samira at my side.

Just then, we see them crest the hill. A wave of Wolves and people, all fueled by rage, all coming to kill the blood family.

“Hold the line!” Reika orders. In a shimmer too fast for the human eye to perceive, she’s standing in human form one moment and then towering over me as the massive Alpha Wolf the next. Amber fur on a gigantic, muscled body stands tall and proud while fierce silver eyes don’t move from the nearing threat.

“Rose!” With no warning Samira crushes her lips to mine with a heartbreaking urgency. Much too soon she’s gone and in her place is the Wolf protector that I love. Black fur and gold stare me down in a silent warning. *Stay behind me, little Red*, her voice warns in my head. So, I move, standing behind her as I’m told.

Casting my eyes down the line of Wolves, I see they've all shifted. A variation of fur on a solid wall of muscle shields the remaining people trying to escape the meadow. Even Auri stands next to them at half their size but looking just as terrifying. I can't bear the thought of something happening to her, so she better be alright by the end of this.

Heart pounding in my chest, sweat forming on my brow as the wind whips my halo of red curls around my face, I'm nearing a full panic at the scene moments away from unfolding when a strong hand grabs onto mine. Looking up, I'm greeted with the green, comforting eyes of my grandma.

"Don't you worry, my dear. The Alphas have faced a greater foe than this."

"Greater than this?! There has to be at least a hundred of them."

Grandma smirks, like she knows something I don't. "Not for long," and she hushes me and nudges my chin so I look straight ahead.

Reika takes one step out from the line, sets all four paws deep into the ground, inhales a deep breath, and lets out the loudest, most terrifying sound I've ever heard. The howl that she produces sounds nothing like a Wolf but more like some mythical creature coming from inside of her body. It's both painful and demanding, and I want to obey but I don't understand the words.

But they do. The Wolves along the line, even Rikon, bow to their Alpha in unison, noses to the ground between both paws. Whatever she said must affect the would-be usurpers differently because half of the Wolves tuck tail and turn, running away as fast as their legs can carry them. Half of the remaining Wolves stop dead in their tracks and roll onto their backs in submission.

Seeing that their larger companions are gone, more than half of the humans run away. The other half are frozen, hands to their ears, screaming as blood oozes out between their fingers. I wonder briefly why the sound didn't affect me that way.

Looking over the quarter of Wolves remaining in the fight, grandma smiles. "That's better, don't you think, my dear?"

"By the Gods," I whisper in utter astonishment.

“Indeed.” Grandma looks proudly on at the scene before her where scraggly, hungry Wolves rush towards the line of power predators in front of us. “This will be quick. You might not want to look, my dear. Some things you can’t unsee.”

But I do look on. I watch as my love, her family, and their most trusted Guard take down Wolf after Wolf with utter brutality and no mercy. Larynxes are ripped from throats, muscle is torn from bone, blood sprays through the air, as howls of pain and victory nearly deafen me. Grandma was right. It’s too much for my heart, but I have a duty. If I’m going to be part of this family one day and worthy of the Alphas’ granddaughter, then I need to keep my eyes open.

Instead of taking note of the damage being done, I focus on the way they fight and what their bodies are saying. Reaching out my golden magick, I touch a Wolf down on the ground, breaths rasping in his chest as he nears death. The malnourished creature is nothing compared to the Wolves I’ve ever seen, and it makes me wonder where he comes from and how he got this way. Pushing my magick into his heart, I feel around for answers as I search all the way up into his brain and listen to his thoughts.

“The paaiiiinnnnn!!!!” he screams in silent horror inside of his head. “Lies! All lies! And now I’m dying and leaving them all alone. My poor family—” the thoughts break apart as he falls into despair. He has only moments to live, and I must make a decision.

“STOP!” I yell over the chaos, magick carrying my voice on the wind and amplifying it. And they all do, even the Alphas. Turning furious eyes on me, I hold up my hands in peace. “It’s not pure hate fueling them. I reached into the heart and mind of this one,” I say motioning to the dying one at my feet. “He’s hungry and desperate. He’s been fed lies, and I’ll bet all of them have. They want something they think you have because someone has led them here.” Turning to the Alphas who are standing side by side covered in gore with blood dripping from their teeth and jaws, I stride forward and fall at their feet in supplication. “Please, Alphas, let me heal the wounded. Give them a second chance. Haven’t we all suffered enough for far too long?”

Amber paws come into my line of sight and Reika bends her head to my hair, inhaling a deep breath and snarling in response. Too afraid to look up into the murderous maw of the Alpha, I keep my head to the ground, waiting for death, but black paws come into my view next to me.

A heated debate I don't understand takes place with lots of snarling and growling, while I wait to feel the pain I know is coming. I've just revealed my red hair, my magick, and my love for her granddaughter in a few minutes time to the most hot-headed beast on Cordova. If I walk away with only my head scalped, then I'd consider myself lucky. But pain doesn't come, only a gentle tug on my cape urging me to stand.

Terrified, I keep my eyes to the ground and hands crossed before me as I wait for the inevitable only to feel a wet nose nudge my chin up. Eye to eye with silver pools of authority, Samira speaks inside of my head.

"She says heal who you can, and she'll take into consideration your words. She might still decide to kill them, but it's the best I could do."

"Thank you," I whisper, completely mesmerized and unable to move from her gaze.

Thankfully, she breaks the connection, and I turn to rush towards the dying Wolf on the ground who wants nothing more than to be with his family again. But I'm too late. Kneeling next to him on the ground, I feel defeat at not being faster, at the useless loss of his life, at the thought of his family waiting for him to come home.

Wetness coats my cheeks, and I'm hoisted up and spun to face grandma's determined face. "Mourn later, my most powerful one. Others lay dying and in need of your gift. Together we can make quick work of the rest."

Nodding in agreement, together we rush from crumpled body to crumpled body, assessing injuries and healing what we can without exhausting ourselves. There are only five of them alive, but the injuries are so severe we must choose what we fix and what can heal on its own. One Wolf in particular gives me pause. She's young, too young to be here, barely an adult.

Her voice cries inside of her body for her mother.

“Hush, young one. Where is this mother you cry for?” I say aloud.

Shocked and suspicious at my intrusion into her thoughts, she refuses to speak for a moment and then gives in, feeling how close she is to death. “She’s back at the camp. Sick and wasting away.”

“Why did you come?”

“I was told the Alphas hid the cure. I just want my mother to live. I don’t care about my life.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, young Wolf. Your life is much too important to give up so easily. I’ll heal you, and when this is over we’ll find your mother and heal her, as well.”

A whimper escapes the dying Wolf, as her breathing becomes more labored. Kneeling beside her, grandma and I make quick work of her injuries.

“You mend, and I’ll numb the pain.” Grandma is numbing her before I have a chance to respond.

Reaching out my magick, with the thinnest thread I mend muscle back to bone and ear back to scalp. Then, I turn magick to pure, molten liquid and coat the broken bones, pulling them back into place with loud snaps, and sealing the breaks in gold. My brow drips sweat, but I feel accomplished as I look her over and seal my work with a final pulse of gold through her veins to regenerate her lost blood.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Samira asks in my head, her voice higher pitched than normal.

“I’m not sure,” I answer her aloud. “It just came to me.”

We continue to move from Wolf to Wolf and, at the end, all five are left breathing. A power courses through me greater than ever before at the life teeming before me, but my victory is short lived when the Guard surrounds them and barks orders. Walking them off, I watch until they’re out of sight and turn to the Alphas more resolute in my abilities and no longer afraid of theirs.

“Don’t kill them,” I demand. “Don’t you dare kill them.”

Daciana snorts in the corner making my head snap to her.

“Something you want to say, warrior?”

She grumbles something I can’t understand causing Samira to exhale loudly.

“Don’t test my aunt, please. She’s quite the beast when she’s in battle mode.” Samira pleads inside my mind.

“Then tell her to show some compassion. A little bit of that might have saved us from all of this bloodshed,” I snap back much harsher than intended, but after what I’ve just done I feel so free and untouchable. It makes me wonder if I can ever die or if I’ll just heal myself of any injury or illness until eternity.

Strange, I think to myself.

Daciana grumbles again, but Samira doesn’t relay, only nods at me in agreement.

“I’m going home, Samira. You know where to find me.” I turn to leave but am interrupted by a quiet voice at my back.

Auri in her human form speaks in a voice that sounds more petrified than I’ve ever heard her. “Don’t leave, yet, Rose. We’ll need you for what’s next.” Her head snaps up moments before the sky starts to darken, quickly pulling us all into a false night.

CHAPTER 41

SAMIRA

“What the fuck is this?” I yell to the other Wolves down our bond. “A storm? I didn’t feel a storm brewing.”

Auri quickly shifts back to her yellow Wolf form and stands in front of Rose and Iris, guarding them. “No. It’s coming.”

“What is ‘it’?” Fayez asks. The large gray Wolf with brown haunches and a brown chest that looks similar to armor stands in front of the Alphas, protecting them from the unknown.

“Evil,” Auri hisses in our minds.

Iris reaches out an arm and pulls Rose behind her, and that movement says everything I’m feeling. We’re not prepared for whatever this is.

“Rose, shield yourself.” Her voice is so focused, so serious, it makes me snap my attention to the hill above the scorched ground where she’s locked her eyes.

“Grandma, I—”

But Iris interrupts her and cuts her off with a hand movement. “No! Shield yourself now! Cover your hair with the hood of your cape and hide behind me. Don’t say a word.”

“What is it?” Alaric asks, staring at them with utter horror.

“Evil,” Auri hisses again. Hackles raise on her back as cloud of black smoke starts to come into view on the hillcrest. A growl like I’ve never heard rips from her throat warning it not to come any closer.

But it doesn’t listen.

“Guard!” Reika orders, and they all obey, forming the same impenetrable line as before.

A haughty feminine laugh erupts and fills the air with menace and violence as the figure strides ever closer. With each passing moment, it becomes more and more clear while the smoke thins slightly, until finally it stands in the middle of the scorched ground atop a burned tree trunk assessing us with black eyes and a smile dripping with an oily liquid.

“Well, well. I didn’t expect to see you here, Iris.” It speaks in a voice that threads together a feminine humanity and a violent creature in a symphony, making my bowels want to release in sheer horror.

I dare to avert my eyes and look back to Iris who’s lifting her chin with pride and bravery. “And I didn’t expect to see you here. You’re supposed to be—”

“Mother?” Auri interjects. Back in her human form, tears burn down her cheeks. “I thought you were dead.”

Elizabeth.

Auri’s adoptive mother sighs loudly. “And I thought they would have killed you long ago. Seems we’re both disappointed today.” She waves her off with a flick of the wrist and turns her attention back to Iris.

Deep seated grief and anger radiate from Auri in invisible waves through the air assaulting everyone standing near her. A shiver runs down my spine and saliva drips from my jaws. I want to rip Elizabeth’s throat out for what she put my sister through and for continuing to hurt her in the “afterlife”.

“Mother? You had a child?” Iris asks with utter shock, her face pale.

The creature scoffs at the suggestion. “This one was a stray I took in after killing her mother.” Elizabeth looks over Auri with disgust, something I never thought was an emotion when it came to the name ‘mother’.

“You killed my birth mother?” Auri’s words are barely audible but her heartbreak is palpable as she looks at her adoptive mother and now admitted murderer of her birth mother. I feel pain for my newfound sister and want to protect her and take her away from this woman, but I can’t. I’m frozen by duty and love.

“I made her an easy target. The Alpha and her stupid daughter did the killing. Rage is a powerful motivator. Of course, she was a casualty, not the real target. I was always after Damon. The only son of the great Alphas!” she booms out mockingly, punctuating her amusement with evil laughter that seems to make the air vibrate. “He was the answer to our freedom, so your mother had to die. For such a powerful Red, she went easily.” Elizabeth looks down at her nails as if they’re more interesting than the line of furious beasts in front of her.

Choking on sobs, Auri demands the answer to one last question through gritted teeth. “What. Was. Her. Name?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It was so long ago. Some type of bird. Cardinal? Bluebird? Quail? Wren?”

Iris sucks in a breath behind me. “Wren of the Mountainbournes?”

“Yes, that sounds familiar.” Elizabeth sneers, looking over Iris like she wants to devour her.

We can all feel it and cower away. The pain and hate radiating from Elizabeth is like nothing I’ve ever felt. Wrong. It feels so wrong, like a waking nightmare that doesn’t belong on our soil.

Reaching down our bond, I speak to Rose in a rush of desperation. “Rose, you need to run! NOW!”

“I won’t leave my grandma!” she yells back at me through our bond rather than aloud. She must feel how wrong this woman is too if she’s not willing to speak aloud and draw any attention to herself, and that makes my protective nature more heightened towards her.

Muscles bulging and paws digging into the ground, I'm ready for a fight when Elizabeth takes a step forward, completely focused on Iris with dead eyes full of black oil leaking down her face.

Iris softens her voice, almost pleading for some sort of connection to the evil standing before us.

"Don't you remember? She was our childhood friend."

"Friend? No. I don't remember any of those, but I do remember you, Iris. You were a good companion for a time, and then we drifted apart and lost each other. When you came back, desperate for a home, I let you in. And how did you repay my generosity, Iris? HOW?!"

"I'm not sure, May. Why don't you tell me?" she says haughtily with her hands on her hips, shielding Rose further.

My lungs seize in my chest. "May??? THE May????? But she's dead?!" Rose shouts down our bond.

"Grandma?" Rose whispers, completely disregarding her grandma's warning to be silent.

Black oily eyes land on a tiny bit of Rose's red cape now visible and her small hand gripped on Iris's wrist. "Oh, look. Iris finally got a family. Grandma, huh? That's cute." Elizabeth, now May, taunts, blackened teeth dripping from her widespread mouth.

Iris slowly drags her eyes up from Rose's hand locked tightly on her and looks back at her former friend, reiterating her previous question. "Tell me how I didn't repay your generosity while our people were hunted and executed, May. Tell me how I wasn't a friend to you even when you pushed me away. Tell me!" Her voice changes to a duet layered with a slight roar, and I try to cover it with my own growl. The rest of the Wolves take my cue and join in to draw attention away from Iris's minor slip.

While May is distracted by our show, a tiny glimmer of gold catches the corner of my eye when Iris's wrist and then fingers briefly flash under Rose's touch. I don't know what she's done, but Iris's demeanor softens and her beast calms.

“She can’t do that again, Rose. I don’t know what they’ll do if they know she’s a halfling.” I warn Rose down our bond, keeping my eyes on Iris and listening for any recognition of Iris’s Wolf by the others.

Rose answers me in something I can only describe as wind chimes in a soft breeze. They aren’t words, more a soothing melody that calms my fears and focuses me. Her magick caresses my darkness and soothes my spirit briefly, and then it’s gone. Snapping back to May and focusing in on my packs’ thoughts, we begin to plan out ways to beat this evil creature.

“I’ll take it on one-on-one,” Reika states strongly, her mind already made up.

“No, you can’t,” Auri’s voice is beaten down, as if she’s already been defeated. “She’s too strong. I had no idea. You won’t win, grandmother. I see it.”

Daciana offers a solution next. “What if Iris distracts her while the strongest of us flank? Then we can attack in unison.”

“No. Won’t work,” Auri mumbles.

“All at once then. Give her everything we have all together,” Fayez, the bravest and strongest warrior, is never one to back down from a fight.

“Loyal to the end, Fayez. And she will be all of our end. All of us except one.” Auri refuses to say anymore, the visions of our deaths pushing from her mind and into ours.

Blood sprays and pieces of Wolf are tossed aside as May digs her literal talons into our flesh and rips us limb from limb. Black oil slicks the ground and halts our movements leaving us waiting for death. Reika looks on as Rikon is surrounded by a thick, black smoke that lifts him from the ground and starts to crush the life out of him. Reika whimpers from down the line.

“ENOUGH!” I order, my voice taking on the tone of the Alpha unintentionally.

They all snap their heads to me, but I snort it off. “I mean, enough. We’ve seen enough, Auri. We get it. What do you suggest since none of us can

come up with an acceptable outcome?”

“Death,” she says with no feeling left in her voice, the emptiness creating a cavern inside my chest.

“Well, that’s not fucking happening today, Auri! We will all walk out of here with our lives. **THAT IS A MOTHERFUCKING ORDER!**” Again, the Alpha’s pitch booms inside of my head and echoes through theirs.

Still in her human form, she whispers aloud, barely audible but loud enough for Wolf ears to pick up. “No, death is not my answer. Death is coming.” With a shaky hand, she points to ground coming alive beneath the scorched ground and then to dark figures on the hill looming down on us from behind May. “Death is coming,” she says again in an eerie hollowed out tone.

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER 42

SAMIRA

Turning in a circle, I take in our surroundings and assess our flank. Behind us, the caverns we thought to be instant deathtraps now teem with human-like figures crawling out of them. Bodies creep along the ground in jerky movements, dirt and skin falling off their bones, as they make their way towards us.

I lock eyes with Rose as she turns back from seeing our incoming company. “Uh, we have a problem, grandma.”

Iris has been going back and forth with May trying to talk some sense into her, trying to find her humanity, her pure Red nature. There’s nothing left there of her old friend, and her shoulders sag in disappointment. Turning at Rose’s voice and hand tugging on her wrist, Iris lets out a gasp when she takes in what’s coming up behind us in a slow crawl.

“Grandma? What are those?” Rose whispers, her voice shaking with fear.

“I’m not sure. They look dead, but that’s not possible. No magick can bring back the dead.”

“No magick that you know of, Iris,” May chuckles behind her, head thrown back, laughing at the Gods above because she’s managed to do the unthinkable.

“You didn’t!” Iris hisses out at her.

“Oh, but I did.”

The figures coming up from the scorched ground start to take shape, and my breath is sucked out of me. “How can this be?” I ask through my bond with Rose. “Look at the ground beneath May. Look!”

Rose snaps her attention forward and her breathing stutters. Red hair matted with dried blood and gore on bodies donning tattered and burned red capes pull themselves from the grounds on which they were killed.

“How can this be?” she whispers to her grandma, whose eyes are now solely focused on the long dead Reds pulling themselves to a standing position in front of May.

Five rotting Reds stand side by side, heads turned unnaturally towards Iris.

“No!” Iris hisses taking in the faces before her. “May, what have you done?!”

“I did what anyone would do. Used every available resource to my advantage. You didn’t think something as trivial as emotions would stop me, did you? They’re already dead, Iris. Might as well use them. Speaking of which...” with a flick of her wrist May gives a silent order to the risen Reds.

Moving at an inhuman speed, they rush us, swiping dead, boney fingers at our faces. A few gain purchase on members of the guard and howls erupt as they dig into fur and flesh. The five corpses advance on Iris, keeping their attention focused on her and slowly closing the distance.

“You did this to usssssss,” they hiss in unison. “Diiiiieee!!!!”

A sob breaks free from Iris, but she holds her head back and puffs out her chest. “May, how could you do this?”

The evil creature cocks her head to the side in feigned ignorance. “What? Not happy about your family reunion?”

Rose gasps from her place behind Iris and chokes out a sob. “No! Grandma?”

“Don’t look at them, Rose. You don’t need to see your ancestors this way.” Iris pushes Rose behind her to shield my sweet Red from seeing who I now know to be the Riverbourne Elders and their children.

A dozen or so paces away, they continue ambling towards Iris, bits of flesh falling from the faces of the two Elder Riverbournes, two young adults, and a small child. Tears of horror and pain fall freely from Iris, coating her face and leaving trails of singed flesh in their wake.

“Rose. Tell your grandma to look away,” I say down our bond remorsefully because I know what needs to be done before they reach Iris.

“Alaric and Favez, protect Iris from those corpses,” I order with authority in my voice. “Get the bodies out of her sight, but be careful of the Elders. They may still hold some power.”

“Yes, Alpha!” they say in unison, giving me pause.

With a blur of speed, the Wolves rush by me and grab the two Elders, quickly carrying them from sight as their teeth can be heard crunching and ripping flesh in the distance. Iris turns away and falls to her knees, wrapping herself around Rose. Her body shakes with grief as Rose cradles her head to her smaller body and tries to comfort her.

With only the two young adults and the child left advancing on Iris, I step forward and stand protectively in front of them. In another blur too quick to register, Wolf forms rush forward and carry off the remaining Riverbourne corpses with silent precision. My ears catch the sounds of bodies being ripped apart, and it’s hopefully far enough away that Iris can’t hear the young ones being destroyed.

“Rose, tell her it’s over,” I whisper.

But I don’t have time to focus on them.

Deep roars and menacing hisses sound off to my side. A large group of rotting Reds is much too close, preparing to attack. Drawn into action, I lunge at a body. Chomping on bone and rotten flesh, I work to rip limbs and heads off to stop the onslaught, but some of them slip past our line.

Fighting and killing for what feels like hours, my body doesn't waver and feels more empowered but others are tiring and some of mine are falling. I'm acutely aware of Rose behind me trying to cure injured Wolves as they battle while protecting herself with a shield. The stress of her effort is palpable through her bond, but I have to push it out of my head so I can focus.

Alaric yelps out in warning not far from me as Auri in her human form rushes towards May. "Mother! Please stop this! Please!!!" she begs in utter desperation. Grabbing onto May's black cloak, she bows her head in submission. "Whatever you want, I'll do it. Just please stop this!"

Kicking her off, May looks down at her like she's nothing more than a bug to crush. "Tsk. Tsk. Stupid girl. I raised you better than this. I raised you to be callous and calculating, and yet here you are weeping for people who murdered half of what you are. Did you forget the Red blood flowing in your veins or do you merely prefer the murderous Wolves?"

"Murderous, yes, but everyone can change. Even you, mother. Come back from this evil. You're better than this. We can unite as one people again and move forward without fear and violence."

Alaric breaks the line and runs towards Auri, seeing what's about to happen, but three Red corpses jump on him mere feet from her and overpower him. The quiet boy who I grew to love as a dear friend and respect as a powerful warrior and fighter is easily forced to the ground. Barely able to give him my uninterrupted attention and unable to overpower my current foe in time, I'm forced to catch glimpses of fire erupting from the Reds and brown fur being engulfed from the corner of my eye.

"Rose! Alaric! Save him!!!" I scream down our bond.

Rose immediately shifts her attention and I feel the moisture being sucked from the air around us, from the soil, from our skin. With a juke to the right, I get behind my foe and rip his head off with one solid bite, crushing the skull in my mouth. Spinning back to my friend burning on the ground, water droplets rush towards him in a sideways rain and begin to spin around him in a cyclone, completely encasing him and dousing the fire.

“Get those Reds away from him!” Rose orders aloud.

Members of the Guard break free from their fights and rush the three fire-wielding Reds, pulling them out of the water and tossing them away from Alaric. Once he’s safe, I return my focus to Auri, the entire reason he risked his life and ran towards evil.

“Mother! Noooooo!!!! Stop this! I LOVE HIM!” Auri’s scream pierces the air and our eardrums.

But her protests and begging and confessions of love have the opposite effect. “Love? Girl, you know nothing of love. It’s a useless emotion that only brings disappointment and pain because, in the end, they always win and we always lose. My brother Timber was beaten nearly to death by Wolves for loving one of their kind, and when he was helpless and disabled they murdered him and ate his heart right in front of the rest of my family before they were killed, too. Iris’s brother, Delta, loved the Alphas’ eldest daughter, Diona, so deeply that he refused to follow the new laws against interbreeding. Being an already mated pair, they kept on with their lives and produced and life. And when she wasted away during pregnancy and died with her child, who did the Alphas blame? Delta. They ate his fucking heart, and all along it wasn’t even his fault she died.”

Stepping off her burned tree trunk, May struts forward through the gore and carnage, and stops mere feet from the Alphas. Looking them down with nothing more than malice dripping off of her, she smirks before she delivers the final blow. “It wasn’t his fault because I did it. I poisoned your precious daughter and many others in your pack. I took those lives, and I’d do it again with a smile on my face.”

A deep inhale of breath comes from the otherwise stoic Reika and Rikon. But there’s no time to process before Auri screams a deep sound of betrayal and rushes up behind the evil creature, shifting midair into her yellow Wolf, with vengeance blazing in her eyes. She’s inches from sinking her teeth into the back of May when a voice causes every member of the blood family to halt.

“Damon?” The great white Wolf, Daciana, stands in shock staring into the face of her fully intact brother. Quickly, she shifts to her human form to

speak to him. “Damon? Is that really you?”

“It’s me, sister.” He looks alive, not well, but alive as he stumbles towards her.

Looking over his shoulder, I see other familiar faces. Proctor Okami, Fenris, a few members of his fallen coup, mothers we lost in childbirth years ago, and many others that seem to be before my time.

“How can this be?” Daciana cries as her hands reach out and she makes contact with his cheeks. “You’re dead. I saw your body with my own eyes.”

“May brought me back. Brought us back. I wanted to see my family, my daughters.” His brown eyes land on the yellow Wolf and smile. “Ah, little one, you’ve grown into such a unique Wolf. Special, just like your mother.”

Auri falters in her steps and turns away from the attack she was so close to landing on May. Changing back to her human form, she stumbles across the ground until she’s next to Daciana. A pale hand reaches out and cups her cheek.

“So beautiful. You have your mother’s eyes.” His voice is everything I ever thought my father would sound like, similar to Rikon in its calming nature but younger.

“I do?” Auri chokes out through sobs, and he nods in confirmation.

“Son? Are you really back?” Reika has completely forgotten the murderous embodiment of evil in front of her and changed into her human form.

“I’m back, mother.”

Rushing to her long lost son, she crashes into him with a tight embrace, pulling the other two women along with her. The three of them stand sobbing into the formerly dead body of my father.

“Something is wrong,” Iris speaks through my Wolf mind, making me blanch and quickly turn around towards her.

There she stands in her Wolf form, muscles bulging, bright green eyes narrowed and suspicious. With no time to unpack how she is talking to me and not one of my blood family, I snap my attention back towards my father but it's too late. Something silver catches a small beam of light filtering through the darkened sky and glints right before it's brought down.

“Nooooo!!!!” I cry out and rush towards them, my feet feeling like they're not moving fast enough. The rest of the Wolves follow suit, but we're too late.

With vicious stabs, Damon plunges a large blade deep into the bodies of the women. The inhuman speed he hid from us reveals itself as flesh tears and blood sprays through the air, coating my tongue in bitterness as we race to stop him.

I reach him first, ripping the knife-wielding arm off and tossing it to the side, followed quickly by Rikon and part of the Guard bringing up my flank. Teeth sink into Damon and another arm goes flying through the air, the creature briefly roaring in frustration rather than pain.

“ROOOSEEEEE!!!” I scream down our bond. “Rose, please!!!!!!!!!!!! Save them!!!!” Small feet patter through the blood soaked ground, and then I hear her sharp intake of breath.

“Oh, Gods!” she cries.

“I know! Just save them! Hurry!!!”

Unwilling to take my eyes off Damon for one second, I circle his now armless body laughing maniacally on the ground. Behind us, May echoes the laugh in a chorus of nightmares. It's too much. Too much noise. Too much pain. Too much betrayal.

Before I'm able to process what I must do, I take the back of his head into my mouth and bite down with every ounce of pain and fury I can muster, destroying my own father. Black sludge explodes from the skull and oozes down my jowls, tasting of rot and hell. The fury of what May's done, how much pain she's caused, turns my dark magick molten.

“You, bitch!!!” I growl, turning towards May, but Iris has beat me there.

Looking nothing like the Wolf I saw just a few moments ago, Iris seems to have grown somehow. Reddish-brown fur ribboned with gray streaks on one of the largest and most heavily muscled Wolves I've ever seen stands guarding the evil creature. Drops of saliva fall to the ground and sizzle as she stares down her prey.

A weak voice chokes on thick liquid behind me. "You can't win." Even as she lays dying, Auri warns us with her last breaths.

"All of them or my grandma," Rose demands of the dying woman.

"Only one can win. Anyone else will die trying."

"Not today!" I yell inside of my Wolf mind. "Rose!"

"I'm trying," she whispers, a sadness etching her voice. And I know what I must do.

Walking up next to Iris, I nudge her gently. "I've got this. Rose needs your help. SAVE. THEM." My words are a demand in the Alpha tone, but this time I fucking mean it. "Save them, Iris! We will not lose a single one of them. Not one. DO. YOU. HEAR. ME?"

Stepping back from May, Iris gives me a quick bow. "Yes, Alpha." And runs off, shifting back to her human form mid stride, exactly as she was born to do.

CHAPTER 43

ROSE

There's so much blood and destroyed flesh under my hands. Ragged breathing from all three women taunt me as I push and pull my golden magick through their bodies, searching for organs I can repair. Auri is the closest to death, so I quickly work to stabilize her most serious injuries before I can move on to the next person.

"Rose," she chokes out weakly through thick blood oozing from her mouth. "You have to help her in the end. She'll do the hard part, but you have to pick up the pieces. Promise me."

"I don't know what that means," I whimper through bleary eyes as my friend starts to fade out.

"You will," she hisses as I forcefully pull her destroyed lung back together with magickal threads. Her breathing becomes slightly less ragged, and I look up to see her bright yellow eyes glowing in her soft features. Skin much paler than normal, I don't know if I've done enough or if she's lost too much blood, but I won't lose her today. Not Auri.

Clenching my jaw and furrowing my brow in determination, I lean over Auri's face so she can look at me and see my intentions through my next words. "Auri, I will always, always help her. I will always be here for her, but she needs you to be here for her, too. Fight this! Stay with me!"

A warm hand touches my back and draws my attention upward where I see grandma sidling up next to me. Kneeling down, she looks over Auri very quickly and places her hands on the small woman.

“Fix her liver, Rose. She’ll survive the rest for a little longer.” Looking up, her face pales when she takes in Reika and Daciana in the arms of Rikon and some of the Guard. Reika’s body is too still and skin too gray for her to live more than a few minutes, if she’s still alive.

“Hurry, Rose!” she hisses and moves away hurriedly towards Reika. “Old friend...” grandma’s voice trails off with a thick layer of pain.

Quickly, I get to work on Auri’s liver. Wading my magick through her abdomen full of blood takes a large amount of my concentration, but then I finally find it. It’s in too many pieces for me to be able to fit them back together quickly. Wracking my brain for a solution, a memory hits me of grandma leaning over my father after his farming accident, his body destroyed and barely hanging on.

“Laurel, there are many things I can heal, but his spine is not one of them. I’m powerful, but not that powerful. I can feel his destroyed organs inside. We must open him up and cauterize—” I let the painful memory trail off.

Cauterize. Fire. But how can I—?

Electricity!

“Auri, look at me.” Vibrant yellow eyes meet mine, the pain hidden well behind them. “I think I know how to fix your liver, but I’ve never done it before. And it’s going to hurt. A lot. You can’t move.”

“Do it, Rose. Hurry,” her voice is weaker than a few moments ago, spurring me into action.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the flow of magick around her organ. Reaching out a thick tendril, I touch it to her liver and think back to the feeling I had when I healed Samira. As easy as breathing, I inhale power from the air around me, pulling from the sky and land. Electric sparks crackle against my arms and travel down my hands where they lay on Auri’s abdomen. Flickering down my magickal bond with her, the current

finds the tendril I've flattened against a ripped piece of the organ, and I let it loose a little.

The answering sizzle seals off a flowing blood vessel, and a large smile appears on my face. "I can do this," I whisper to her.

"Then do it quickly, Rose. They need you."

Opening my eyes, I tilt my head back and look up to the darkened sky. With a deep inhale, I pull every bit of power I need and send long strings of electric healing through my gift and into Auri's body. In just a few minutes, her deep bleeding has stopped and she's stabilized.

"There," I say with satisfaction, wiping the sweat from my brow. It was easier than I thought. Grabbing her bloody hand, I place it on her chest over her heart. Yellow eyes blink slowly, the threat to her life not over but a little farther away now. "You will survive. Keep your heart beating, my friend. Your sister will need you. Guard!" Large men appear at my side instantly. "Move Auri to the other side of the river. Look for the hut with pigs out back. My mother, Laurel, will take care of her."

Quickly, they gingerly pick her up and rush her off while I move my eyes to my grandma kneeling next to Reika. Falling down next to her, I put my hands on the too still Alpha and find a pulse just barely palpable even through magick.

"Grandma, she's almost—"

But she cuts me off curtly. "I know. I know." Her head falls and she kisses the knuckles of her friend, looking back up into Rikon's pitiful face kneeled on the other side of Reika, clutching her hand. "It's her spine. I can't fix this."

"I can," I say confidently, and I fully believe my own words. "Stand back. Don't touch her."

Rising to my feet, I hold my hands up to the sky, demanding the power to enter my body. Deep inhales of air embolden me, fill me with what I need to heal her. Looking down at the still and unconscious woman, I give her a warning I'm not sure she can hear.

“Reika, this is going to hurt.” And I fall to my knees, slamming my hands down on her body, power flowing through her in loud crackles that singe the ground beneath her. Power courses through me, through her, healing everything it touches and finally lands on her damaged spine. Ramping up my effort, I inhale deeply and push every ounce of magick into her, wrapping it around her damaged vertebrae, through the severed spinal cord, knitting everything back together, until a loud inhale of breath stops me.

Looking down into silver pools of alertness, I’m jolted with shock and fall backward in the blood covered ground. And Reika doesn’t take her eyes off me as she slowly sits up.

“Young one...” she lets her words trail off as she examines her blood tinged hands like she’s never seen them before. “I’m alive?” she whispers, confused by what she’s seeing.

Falling to the ground next to her, Rikon pulls her hands to his chest and presses his forehead to hers. “Yes, my love. You are.”

“I was gone to the other side, and now I’m back? I feel so strange,” she whispers more for him to hear than for anyone else.

“No, you weren’t gone, yet, my love. You still had a pulse. Rose healed you.”

She hums against his cheek, nuzzling him, inhaling his scent. “Something to discuss another time. Where is she?”

“Samira has her,” I interject. “Auri said it has to be Samira.”

Reika nods with an understanding, of what I’m not sure. “Where is Auri?”

“At my house with my mother. She’s alive.”

Reika nods and turns to look for her daughter. When her eyes land on Daciana laying some yards away, injured and arguing with the Guard over getting her to safety, she smiles.

“Get your hands off me. It’s merely a flesh wound!” Daciana punches a man with her uninjured arm.

“Your arm is hanging on by a tendon. Sit still, woman!” one of the exasperated men bark at her. “You!” He calls to a young warrior jogging by. “Help me look for her ear.”

Reika shakes her head, clearly amused with the antics rather than appalled as I am. “Iris, my friend, would you mind tending to my furious daughter. I believe Rose has other things to focus on.”

I don’t even have time to register the rest of what’s said before a loud growl echoes through the air and sends me tumbling to the side. Looking up, I see Samira, my Samira, in her Wolf form surrounded by her darkness and stalking a circle around an amused May. Her broad smile drips and oozes black rot while her narrowed eyes assess every move Samira makes.

“Oh, come now, Samira. Don’t be angry with me. Give your mother a hug.”

Mother?!

With no warning, Samira lunges at her faster than I’ve ever seen anyone move. Snapping her jaws at her neck, she barely misses as May invokes a speed burst of magick similar to Damon’s and moves in a blur.

“Tsk, tsk, daughter. I thought you were smarter than that. Try again,” she taunts, beckoning Samira to come at her again.

Full of rage, Samira dives for her again and lands in an empty spot, May appearing a few feet away. Bending at the waist, May starts to sway in an unnatural movement, more like a serpent than a human. The air turns freezing cold and ice crystals form on the surface of the blood congealing on the ground.

“Come on, daughter,” she hisses in a sickly voice, making my stomach roil. “Let your evil out. Kill them all.”

Standing tall in her pitch black fur, Samira grows before my eyes and towers over May, casting a shadow on the evil creature. Gold eyes shine like radiant beacons as her darkness flows around her in a thick smoke, fueled by rage at the woman who dares to call herself ‘mother’. In answer, Samira lets loose a powerful growl sending an answering heat back through the air. I can only watch on in horror as the elements seem to bend

to Samira's will and embers burn throughout the darkness growing larger by the second.

"They don't love you, Samira. They own you. You're property, not a person, not to them. Kill the Wolves and be free. Anything and everything can be yours. I'll teach you what we are, what we can do." Reaching out a hand, she beckons her to join her in the demon's dance. May's words are alluring to the point of almost overriding my logical brain, and I can see Samira feeling a similar inner turmoil. The evil creature smirks at her near victory, but her smile falls abruptly when Samira's darkness reaches out and slaps her hand away, ashes falling to the ground from the char.

A howl of frustration tears from May's throat, echoing all around us. "You fool! I thought when I chose your father to breed with it would produce an unbeatable hybrid, but it seems you're as weak as the rest of them. Weak!" Spitting black sludge on the ground in insult, the creature turns her back to Samira and takes a step away. "Pity. You had so much potential," she mumbles more to herself than anyone else.

Hands pointed to the ground, May elongates her body in a stretch, bone and muscle snapping and popping. Fingers stretch out and then quickly ball into fists before I realize what she's doing.

"Samira, watch out!" I call out, but I'm too late.

The ground around Samira's paws turns to black oil, sucking her down into the ground and rendering her mostly helpless while she fights with all of her strength against it. Turning back to assess her work, pure black eyes with spidering black veins of evil leach through May's face. Skin pulses and cracks open beneath the evil flowing through her body. Black sludge oozes from the wounds and drips from her gaping mouth full of now razor sharp teeth.

"You will let her go, demon!" Reika booms, standing next to me.

As if she is just now realizing she has an audience, May takes brief notice of Reika and waves her off. "Not your turn, dog. You'll be my new rug soon enough. Now sit!" Pushing her palm towards Reika, power slams into the Alpha's body and she's forced back to the ground.

“I’m pinned. I can’t move! GUARD! Kill that creature!” she orders, fully enraged but unable to budge.

The Guard steps forward but the motion is quickly repeated, and they find themselves in a similar position as Reika.

“Now, chill out,” she chuckles and exhales over her palm, shooting icicles at them through the air. Tiny shards slice and pierce their skin, but they don’t react. Advanced Wolf healing seals up the wounds, leaving only small trails of blood as evidence.

“Stop this now!” Samira demands.

“Or what? You’ll kill me? You’ll kill your own mother? Not likely,” she scoffs back. With a clap of her hands, she pulls something dark from the ground, lifting it up to the sky with little force. Before us, a dark but see-through barrier sits, keeping us from Samira and forcing us to be spectators to whatever sick game she has planned. “There. That’s better. Now, where were we?”

Sauntering over towards Samira, black tendrils akin to octopus tentacles float from her fingertips. Furious, Samira snaps at her with sharp teeth, daring her to get within reach of her bite.

“This will only hurt a little,” May whispers, sending the tentacles towards my Wolf while she stays at a safe distance.

“No,” I whisper, paralyzed by fear.

“Don’t you fucking touch her or I’ll rip your throat out!” Daciana roars.

May takes no notice, pushing the evil closer to Samira. Tentacles of evil dance through the air, inching closer and closer to my Wolf.

“May, stop!” Grandma stands next to our Wolf friends who remain pinned to the ground. “May, you have to stop this! Everything can be fixed. Don’t do anything you can’t undo, old friend.”

The term of endearment gives her pause, and she looks up to grandma with a half smile. “Oh, Iris, you old fool. We’re not friends. The May you knew died a long time ago. She’s gone forever. I’m so much better. Don’t you

feel it, Iris? The freedom to live outside of rules and expectations. Come play with the darkness, Iris. It's so deliciousssssss," her voice hisses. Black saliva thick in her mouth drips down her chin and sizzles when it touches the ground.

"I will never use dark magick. Never! We are Reds. Peace, healing, love, harmony. Not whatever this thing is you've become. Let us help you come back to yourself, May."

"I am myself," her voice deepens. "I am fully myself. Evil is everywhere. It's all around us, and soon it will be all there is. The old ways are gone. Now is the time to move into the future. An all Red, dark future. We will rule, as was always meant to be."

Turning back to Samira, May focuses her darkness and sends tendrils impaling into her black fur. A howl of pain cuts through the air like a knife and down into my soul.

"Nooooo!!!!" I yell, reaching for Samira but blocked by the barrier. "Stop this! Please!" I beg, but May doesn't pay me any mind.

Black hands now pressed against her body, Samira writhes under the dark magick that invades her. The color begins to leach from her fur and absorb up the hands and then arms of May. Samira continues to howl for what feels like hours but can't be more than a few minutes, growing weaker and weaker, her Wolf body shrinking. When she can't take anymore and May is satisfied, skin completely black now all the way to her shoulders, Samira collapses into a heap in her human form. Her unclothed body lay still in the blood soaked ground, unmoving.

"Samira," I whisper down our bond but get no response, so I yell her name aloud. "Samira!!!" Still, she doesn't move. "I can't tell if she's breathing," I cry hysterically, fingers clutched to grandma's sleeve. "Is she breathing? Can you tell? SAMIRA!!!!!!!"

May looks down at her lifeless body and tsks. "Shame. I thought she could handle more." The final insult, she kicks blood soaked mud at her dead daughter, discarding her without a single emotion.

“You fucking animal!” Daciana roars. “I’ll eat your fucking heart for this!”

Sauntering over to the barrier in front of Daciana who’s pinned to the ground with her arm still barely hanging on, she bends over in front of the legendary warrior and smiles. “You first” she whispers and blows her a kiss. “Actually, I think I’ll start with both of the Alphas’ hearts sautéed with mushrooms and ginger. Mmmm. Sounds divine. And you can watch as I rip them from their chests.”

Stepping back, May drops the barrier, sending out her black magick and reaching for Reika and Rikon. Tentacles wrap around their necks, squeezing until their eyes bulge and their mouths hang open gasping for breath. The powerful Alphas are lifted from the ground and held in the air with little effort, while the rest of us look on in horror, completely helpless against her. Daciana and the other Wolves thrash violently against their invisible bonds, alternating between yelling and pleading for their release and threatening painful revenge.

“One half of the whole,” Samira’s voice echoes in my mind causing my skin to prickle and heart to ache. It’s like I can really hear her, but she lays still. Dead.

What does it mean if she’s gone? I thought it would be us together in the end. I thought we could save everyone from this evil, but now I don’t know. My other half is gone, and I’ll never feel whole again. Never see beauty or feel love or happiness ever again. Never—

But my thought is interrupted. “One half of the whole,” Samira’s voice says louder in my head.

“Samira?!” I yell down our bond, trying to school my features and not react and alert May.

“I’m here. When I give the signal, hit her with everything you have.”

Dark energy filled with the same fiery embers creeps out silently from Samira’s still body, ghosting along the ground. Distracted and overly confident, May doesn’t recognize vengeance coming for her until it’s too late.

Like a predator stalking its prey, Samira waits until just the right moment and strikes, wrapping May's arms tightly to her body in a thick veil of darkness and squeezing. The Alphas are instantly dropped, both of them falling to their knees and taking in long raspy breaths.

My heart beats frantically in anticipation of May's reaction.

CHAPTER 44

SAMIRA

My Wolf is gone. I can't feel the beast inside of me and don't know if I'll be able to bring it back. Fury courses through me, and I squeeze my magick tighter around May's body.

"What did you do to my Wolf?" I seethe.

But I'm squeezing her too tightly for anything other than a gurgle to come out.

"The Wolf may not always be there." My grandmother's voice echoes in my head from a conversation we had at her breakfast table in what feels like a lifetime ago. So much has changed.

Looking over to Rose, she's clutching onto her grandma's sleeve, frozen in terror while I squeeze the life out of my mother. Even thinking the word 'mother' puts a sour taste in my mouth. It feels wrong, but I know it to be true. I just don't want it to be.

Spinning May around to face me, I watch as her eyes bulge and mouth hangs open in a silent scream, black oozing from every orifice. And I don't feel bad about what I'm doing. Not one bit. Vengeance pulses through my veins in a dark magick that feels more and more like home the longer I use it on her.

"Samira," Rose whispers, "you have to let her go."

But I'm too consumed to fully register what she's saying, determined to crush every drop of blackness from my evil mother.

"Samira!" she shouts. "Eyes on me!" Her tone is powerful, commanding, and I want nothing more than to obey her.

Rose stands, her hands on the barrier, gold magick filtering into it. In the span of a breath, it disintegrates before my eyes, and the wind moves freely, cascading her scent all around. My mouth waters, and her eyes widen in realization.

With a slow smirk, red curly hair in a fiery halo around her, she beckons me to her in a voice that tinkles with musical notes calling to my soul. "Come, my love. Let's be done with this. You can't kill her. The darkness will consume you. Let her go and come to me. "

So, I do as she says and drop May to the ground. In swift strides, I step over May's crushed body and close the distance between us. Hands skimming through her curls, I tangle my fingers around the back of her neck and pull her mouth to me in a crushing kiss. Her golden light is all I see behind my sealed lids. Her essence is all I taste. Her scent is all invading and all encompassing.

"Rose," I pant through kisses. "I thought I was gone. I thought I would never—"

"I know," she interrupts. "Me, too. But you're here with me now. Stay."

"Always. I will always stay with you. I will always be yours. Nothing will separate us again. Nothing!"

In a swift motion, I pick her up and she wraps her legs around my waist, our tongues tangling and breaths quickening.

"Eh hem," someone interrupts. Daciana. "Do you two mind?"

Rose turns a beautiful shade of red and buries her face in my neck. "So embarrassing," she mumbles.

"Not for me," I reply loud enough for the rest of them to hear. "I'm done hiding."

“That’s all fine and well, young one, but your family doesn’t want to see you fucking so...” With her good arm, Daciana shoos us back towards the Red village. “And put some clothes on!” I forgot I was naked but couldn't care less with Rose safe in my arms.

Refusing to let her go, I turn towards the village and take a few urgent steps, but a noise catches my attention. Spinning around with her held tightly to me, I watch in denial as May stands up and brushes herself off like I didn’t nearly just crush the life out of her.

“Well, isn’t this sweet,” she seethes. “My own daughter has fallen in love with a Red. Your father would be proud.”

Rose pats my arms in a signal to put her down, so I do and then move her behind me in a protective stance.

“Grandma, you and the Wolves get out of here. Now,” she orders in a voice that shows none of her former timidity.

“I’m not leaving you, my dear.” Iris is resolute and stands ready for a fight behind us. Next to her, the Wolves have all risen and are standing in a line, ready for a battle.

Rose’s voice sounds remorseful. “I’m sorry for what I’m about to do.” In a blinding pulse of golden light, a dome of magick encases our family and friends in a shield.

Shocked at the level of power she’s been hiding, I suppress my instincts to clutch onto my powerful, small Red and instead back away and work my way behind May while she’s distracted.

Quickly, they realize what she’s done. “No!” Reika shouts. “You can’t do this! You won’t win!” With all of her strength, Reika’s huge fists pound on the barrier to no avail. It doesn’t even register her force.

“Shhhhh,” Rose soothes the angry beasts. “Have faith.” Her voice tinkles like something from another land and time, like an ethereal angel brought down to save us all.

May chuckles menacingly under her breath at the exchange, interrupting my awe. “She’s brave. I’ll give you that, but naive and overly confident.

Girl, do you really think you can keep me from them? If I want them dead, they die.”

Bright green eyes turn on May, looking her over with pity and remorse. I don’t know what Rose has figured out. If I’m being honest, I don’t need to know because my actions are clear, and I have faith in her to do what she must.

“May,” she says, her voice loud and firm, “I don’t need to keep you from them indefinitely. Just long enough.”

“Long enough for what?” she sneers.

Taking my cue, I shoot out every fiber of dark magick in my body. Using every drop of my energy, I shoot spears of black from my body and pierce into May. Roars erupt from her throat in wet gargles as her organs are penetrated and black ooze starts dripping from her wounds.

“NOOOO!!!” she roars, the light blinking out in the sky overhead and sending us into a near total night.

My muscles strain, but I keep pushing my power into her, growing my spears wider inside of her flesh. Sounds of ripping tissue and sinew assaults my ears as lightning flashes overhead. Speared throughout her body, May is stuck between me and the ground in a suspended, animated state. Pools of evil liquid pour from her and grow beneath as she writhes and spits threats, trying to pull evil from the land and sky.

“I’LL KILL YOU ALL FOR THIS! ALL OF YOU! NO ONE WILL BE SPARED!”

And I believe her completely. Knowing what will happen if she survives, I close my eyes and focus on the darkest parts of myself, the parts deep down that have scared me since Rose brought me back from near death. And I let them grow. Flexing like pent up muscles, darkness starts to gradually grow inside of my body, and without warning a flood is unleashed.

I open my eyes, but I see nothing before me except for May. No sound can reach me. No air or sensation touches my skin. My Wolf is still silent and

missing. The only thing inside of me is rage. Pure, vengeful hate and evil flowing in oceans of black.

“Join me,” a feminine voice hisses inside of my head. “Join me and rule them all.”

Yes. That sounds like fun, I think, but the voice that I know to be my own sounds nothing like me.

Where am I? Am I dead? Is this hell?

Kill, hate, revenge. Those are the only words that keep repeating over and over inside of my head. But I know there’s something missing.

A throaty, wet feminine voice laughs loudly. My eyes snap up to the only person I can see.

May.

“You’ve lost, little Red. She’s mine now.”

Red? And realization hits me. *Red! Where is she?!*

But I can’t move. I’m stuck in a world and body full of evil. Panic sets in, and I try to burst free. Pushing my dark magick out of my body in pulsing waves, I try to break the hold this evil has on me.

No more! I yell inside of my head.

Over and over, I try to break the hold the evil has on me, all the while May laughs madly from her suspended state, still pierced and held between myself and the ground.

I feel it weakening me, sucking me in. My mind is starting to grow darker, my logic dimmer, my inner thoughts more quiet.

Gods! It’s too late.

Legs quiver and then collapse, but I feel no ground beneath me. Only an endless empty fall into a dark abyss. I can’t even see May anymore.

“MINE!” an angry voice tinkles through my head. *Or is it reality?* I’m not sure.

And then something touches my face. Cool at first and then warming, I feel it before I can see it. It feels like gold. Like life. Familiar. Spreading through my cheeks and then into my eyes, gold glitter begins to light up my dark hell.

“There you are,” she whispers. And I see her faintly. Rose! My Rose! “Come back to me, Sammie.”

Warmth and love and magick spread through my head, clearing out the evil and darkness, pulling me back into the light, back into existence, back to emerald eyes and red hair. Back to my Goddess.

“Rose,” I choke out through a parched throat. “I thought I was lost forever. It had me.”

“It will never take you from me. Nothing will. You are mine!” The conviction in her voice makes her magick pulse against my skin and spread rapidly through the rest of my body. “Now, we all need you to control this darkness and use it to end this. It’s time.”

I nod, knowing what I have to do. Standing from the ground I didn’t realize I was laying on, I reach out and pull Rose to stand next to me. With a soft kiss on her knuckles, I release her hand and focus back on the evil in front of us.

Feeling Rose’s beautiful magick behind me and my own darkness controlled inside of me, I take a step towards the woman who’s ruined so many lives and threatens everything I love in my world.

“It’s time for you to go now, mother.”

CHAPTER 45

ROSE

I'm not scared. Not for any of us because I know what I need to do.

Samira steps towards her mother, the darkness spinning around my magickal Goddess in storms of black clouds and fiery embers.

Looking at the woman who gave her life and abandoned her, at the woman who hoped to use her as a tool to seek the ultimate revenge, Samira holds her head high and speaks in a deep voice layered with her beast. "I'm sorry it's come to this. Last chance to come back to the light."

Shivers race down my spine and goosebumps erupt all over my body. Our family encased on the other side of May widen their eyes at the sound of her voice but remain quiet and still at the ensuing danger before them.

With no effort, Samira pulls her spears of magick from the ground and lifts May to a vertical position, spinning her so she can look into her eyes for what must come next.

"I should have drowned you when I had the chance," May spits at her. Black oil continues to spill from her body, but it's only weakened her a little while keeping her immobile.

"Maybe you should have," Samira agrees, "but then who would have been left to kill you? Goodbye, mother."

At those final words, Samira raises her fists straight out between the two of them and spreads her fingers out. Darkness shoots from them while the spears in May's body simultaneously rip her body to shreds with a sickening sound.

In a matter of a heartbeat, it's over.

The ground is littered with small, quivering pieces of flesh and the black oily substance, but no blood. Only flesh, black oil, and tiny pieces of fabric and hair remain of the evil that threatened to take us from each other and destroy everyone we love.

Samira's head falls forward and her shoulders slump, but she doesn't move and doesn't speak. Slowly, I walk up behind her and place my hands on her back, sending my love and warmth through her.

"I'm sorry it came to that, Sammie. You did the right thing." I try to soothe her with my whispers.

Unmoving for a few minutes, I fear my words haven't helped, my touch isn't helping, but then she turns and pulls me to her chest, tears dripping off her face and splashing in my hair and onto my clothes. We stay like that for a long time, holding each other and crying in relief. Eventually, she pulls back from me and her warm hands encase my face and turn my head up to look at her.

"I was so scared I was going to lose you or lose myself and never find you again. But it's over now. We can be together forever." Lips crush into mine with an urgency, and I melt into her body. Our tongues entwine and hands move through each other's hair between gasps and whispered 'I love you's'.

"Take me h—" but my request is cut off with loud yells from behind us.

"WATCH OUT!"

Samira pushes me behind her body for protection at the same time as I throw up my shield around us. Peering out from under her arm, I look to the spot where May's remains are. The black ooze is moving towards itself, the pieces of flesh giggling and combining slowly where the outline of her body has already started to take shape again.

“I’ve got this,” I say, completely confident in what I must do. Pushing out from under Samira’s arm, I turn to her and put my hand on her chest. “Stay.” With a peck on her lips, I turn and seal the shield down between us.

Furious, Samira bangs on the barrier. “No! Rose, let me out of here or so help me you won’t sit for a week!”

But I only look over my shoulder and smirk back at her. “Shhh!”

Looking down at the now nearly reformed May, a single eyeball narrows in the skull and watches me. “I’m sorry,” I whisper to her, and then throw my hands to the sky.

Pulling from above, my body fills with all encompassing electric energy and sings in my blood. Spinning my gold with the electric magick, I push all of my power into it and throw my hands to the ground where May’s eyeball rounds at the realization of what’s coming for it.

Flesh singes and sizzles at the contact, but I push farther and send my magick through every drop, every bit, every minuscule piece and pore and grain of evil. As I move through it, I heal it, tearing apart the evil and replacing it with purity.

Sounds start to rise around me to a nearly deafening crescendo. Birds sing, the wind blows, the sun beams down in a blinding light. I can hear the ocean crashing far away but as if it’s right next to me. The river rushes and crashes against the bank in the distance while animals stampede about in the forest, making the ground somehow rumble beneath us.

And just as I feel like I’ll never hear or see again, just as I feel like I’m about to spend the last bit of magick inside of me and my life force along with it, arms encircle my waist and a solid body anchors to my back.

“I’ve got you,” Samira whispers into my ear. And she does.

Love and strength radiate from her and into me, giving me what I need to push on. With a final inhale, I pull in everything I can from nature and push it through myself into May’s remains, ripping apart what can’t be fixed and replacing what can be with every bit of goodness and life and love that I can give it.

And then I collapse.



I don't know how much time passes or where I am, but when I finally come out of the bright, blank place of unconsciousness I was lost in I see her. Clutched to her chest, Sammie's heartbeat pulls me from whatever place I got stuck in and back to her.

Our eyes meet and instantly every worry about what happened to May and if the evil is gone is answered with her smile. With the smile that once scared and intrigued me and now feels like home, like everywhere I want to be for the rest of my life.

"There you are, baby," she croons, running her fingers over my cheeks and taking in every feature of my face with her assessing bright gold eyes.

I inhale a deep breath. "Your eyes! They're completely gold."

"I know," she chuckles. "And yours shine like the brightest emeralds."

"How?"

She shrugs, seeming less concerned than I am that her beast eyes are fully present in her human body. "Does it really matter? We're alive!" Her smile beams from ear to ear, black hair falling in cascades around her perfect face.

Reaching up, I run my fingertips over her cheekbones and down her jaw. "Yes, we are."

And when she bends down and our lips touch, my golden magick crackles against her dark magick, and I know nothing will ever again threaten to keep us from our eternity together.

EPILOGUE

SAMIRA

The ground passes by in a blur and a giggle tinkles off the trees. Deep in the forest, animals skitter out of my way while my love clings to my back.

“Did you see that creature? What was that?” Rose and I have been running for days, watching magick come back into the land and finding new animals and plant life.

I chuckle in my Wolf throat and speak to her down our bond. “Looked like a horse with wings to me.”

“Horses don’t have wings! We’re hallucinating.”

“No, they don’t but maybe it’s something new or something old coming back.”

“Let’s go talk to it!”

“Let’s not. A giant black Wolf carrying a small woman on its back is probably not the introduction it wants. We’ll see it again.”

“We better,” she pouts behind me.

So many new creatures have shown up since Rose eliminated evil from Cordova that we don’t even have words for most of them.

“We have an eternity to talk to it and others like it, my love.”

“Yes, we do,” she hums, and I can feel her body warm through my fur.

My Wolf came back when Rose wiped the evil from May’s remains. A lot of things came back. I don’t have words for what I saw, and thankfully Rose hasn’t asked. When she threw all of her power and magick into healing that evil, she did more than she knows. She couldn’t save May. That woman was lost to us a long time ago, but she did something more.

She freed the land. She’s given us life and harmony back. A balance that none living has ever known has taken over, and we all feel it to our cores. It’s freedom. It’s love. It’s life.

Rose interrupts my internal thoughts with a gentle tug on the fur between my shoulder blades. “We’ve been running for hours. It’s time to go home.”

I sigh deeply but slow down my steps and walk an arc back towards our village.

“I know you don’t want to, but they’re waiting on you,” she urges.

Taking my time walking back, we enjoy the forest in silence and breathe in the air that now feels so much lighter than before. By the time we make it back to the village, we’re later than I meant to be so we rush to the meeting hall.

Shifting back to my human form, I throw on the clothes Rose pulls from her bag and turn towards her for a final assessment.

“How do I look?”

Her eyes run up my body, over my boots, my fitted pants, the white tank top and black jacket and then my face. On tiptoes, she stands and pulls my hair from under my jacket and sweeps it down my back and over my shoulders.

“There. You’re perfect.” Ghosting a small peck on my lips, she slaps me on the ass and pushes me through the doors before I can respond.

Every Wolf and every Red in Cordova turns to look up at me. My family stands on the dais, all in a row with hands clasped before them. Finding

Reika easily, I apologize silently for being late and she nods in understanding with a knowing smirk on her face.

“Citizens of Cordova!” she booms. “I present you, Samira the Black. The first in the long Alpha bloodline born of Wolf and Red. The first creature to wield dark magick and live in the light. The most powerful creature on Cordova who alongside her mate, Rose of the Reds, eliminated the evil from this land. Protector and Savior of us all. Your new Alpha!”

The crowd erupts in a cheer, and a tiny hand clutches onto mine as Rose sidles up next to me. And in this moment, though I’ve said it and seen it, I know it now to finally be true.

We are free.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Scott, my love: You are the greatest love of my life, inspiration for all of the HEAs in my stories, and my own personal HEA. I am forever grateful for you.

Rene Wolfe, my dear friend: Logical, supportive, driven, and my never-ending task master. Thanks for pushing me to be greater!

My “Get to Writing” Ladies: I thank you all for listening to my blathering, crying, filthy talk, and most of all for being supportive.
#WomenSupportingWomen

My Readers: Thank you for reading this labor of love. This indie author is appreciates every single page read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Lee's interest in romance began in middle school. It wasn't until adulthood when a friend introduced her to dark romance that she really found her niche.

A fan of a powerful woman, Stephanie got tired of searching for her kind of character and chose to write one instead. Thus, *I Dared to Dream* was born.

Now, Stephanie enjoys writing all manner of smut and making her husband blush.

Follow Stephanie for News on Upcoming Books
And Other Shenanigans

@StephanieLeeBooks
on Instagram and Facebook
@StephanieLeeWrites on TikTok
www.StephanieLeeBooks.com

Find her books on Amazon
Thank you for your support!

